APEX MAGAZINE

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MAY 2014

EDITED BY SIGRID ELLIS
COVER ART BY ANNELIESE JUERGENSEN

2014 HUGO AWARD-NOMINEE FOR BEST SEMIPROZINE!

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Resolute: Notes from the Editor–in–Chief

“Who are you?”

“What do you want?”

The television program *Babylon 5* made these questions a central theme of the series. Elder races, nigh–unto–gods to the younger species that crowded the screen, would ask these questions of our protagonists. What do you want? Who are you?

Identity. Desire.

Will.

I remember when I first saw Bab 5. I remember the sense of gravity, of import, those questions held. How does what I want shape who I am? How are my desires created by my identity?

I could answer those questions when I was young. These days I am older and wiser and I have not a damn clue how to respond.

This issue of Apex has a lot of desire. A great deal of will. Characters *want* things. In Caroline M. Yoachim’s “Paperclips and Memories and Things That Won’t Be Missed,” we have pure wanting. “Falling Leaves” by Liz Argall is raw with the need for identity. And E. Saxey’s “Not Smart, Not Clever,” is an uncompromising portrayal of a teeth–baring anger, anger at being thwarted and being boxed, anger that decides that desire and identity are practically the same thing.

I urge you to read and then re–read Judith Chalmer’s “Likeness.” Just what is the identity of the object of the piece? And how does that identity shape the narrator? In Gwynne Garfinkle’s “she’s alive, alive,” we are monstrous. In Emma Osborne’s “Crashdown,” we are destroyed.

In addition, Apex is pleased to bring you a previously unpublished Seanan McGuire poem. In conjunction with the release of her new book, *Sparrow Hill Road*, Apex presents “Graveyard Rose.”

This month brings you an essay from writer and producer Javier Grillo–Marxuach, recounting the search for operational theme in episodic television. Maggie Slater interviews Caroline Yoachim, and Loraine Sammy interviews our cover artist Anneliese Juergensen. Anneliese’s piece, “Stars,” brings a sense of joy and wonder. I can’t help but look at it and smile.

For our subscribers we have an excerpt from Daryl Gregory's just–released novel, *Afterparty*. Our reprint is "Microbe" by Joan Slonczewski, originally published by *Analog* in August, 1995.

Do you know who you are? Do you know what you want? Good for you. Be careful with it, is all I'm saying. Hold those things precious and close, and don't accept any wishes from strangers.

Sigrid Ellis
Editor–in–Chief

Paperclips and Memories and Things That Won’t Be Missed

Caroline M. Yoachim

The ghost in my attic is Margaret, but she lets me call her Margie. She was seventy–six years old when she died, and now that she’s a ghost she sits in her rocking chair day and night, holding a tiny baby in her arms. The baby rarely moves and almost never cries. His name is Gavin, and he is thin and wrinkly and covered in fine brown hair. Funny looking, as preemies often are, but sweet nonetheless. Margie keeps him wrapped in a blanket of cobwebs, which I think is disgusting. I’ve always hated spiders.

Did you know that ghosts are like pack rats? We collect all manner of things: Barbie hairs and memories and peanut shells and dreams of death. Invoices and autumn leaves and the words on the tip of your tongue. Margie collected Gavin, and now she collects cobwebs from my attic to be sure that he stays warm.

Technically it isn’t my attic; it belongs to my husband now. My former husband. He lives in what was once my house, with his new wife and her two kids and a newborn baby boy. The baby looks like Gavin might have, if Gavin had lived.

Here is the problem with collecting. Whatever you take, the living no longer have. So a ghost with good intentions, who takes away stubbed toes and sunburns, ends up surrounded by pain. A malicious ghost ends up with cotton candy and laughter and baby smiles and — well, it’s hard to stay mean surrounded by all that. That’s why most ghosts collect harmless stuff like paperclips and lint.

Margie wanted to be good. When she was alive, she miscarried five times. There was something wrong with her, something that kept her from carrying a baby to term. When she died, she wanted to help other women, to keep them from suffering the way that she’d suffered. She found a woman, thirty–four weeks pregnant, whose baby had died because a blood clot cut off his supply of nutrients and oxygen. Margie took the lifeless baby and named him Gavin. The pregnant woman, of course, was me.

Remember the problem with collecting? I woke up one morning without my baby, and with no real explanation why. The doctors were baffled, and I was devastated. I had lost my little boy, and there wasn’t even a cheek to kiss, no tiny body for me to hold one time before I said goodbye.

My friends and family tried to help, but they didn't understand. My husband buried his grief in work and stayed at the office late while I cried myself to sleep. No one remembered the bottle of Percocet left over from when I got my wisdom teeth removed, so no one thought to take it away from me.

Margie haunts the attic, so I mostly haunt downstairs. I spent my first few years of ghosthood collecting lipstick from the purses of my husband's girlfriends, but eventually I got over my jealousy. He remarried, and the house is nicer with children in it. Now I collect stray socks from the dryer and baby toys that fall behind the furniture.

I'm using the socks to make a quilt for Gavin, to replace the terrible cobwebs that Margie uses. I need perhaps a dozen more socks to finish it. In the meantime, I take the toys to the attic, and give them to Margie. She died old enough that her memory is bad, and she doesn't remember that the baby she holds is my son. She simply sits in her rocking chair and cuddles his tiny body up against her chest. She tells him how his mother would have loved him, if he'd lived, and she gives him the toys that I bring.

All ghosts are collectors, even my unborn baby boy. He collects static from the radio and warm water from the bath and muffled voices that come up through the ceiling. Anything that reminds him of the womb. He is trying to recreate me.

I am tempted, sometimes, to collect my husband's new baby. He is pudgy and gurgly and just starting to smile. But he isn't my baby, and I know all too well the pain that it would cause if I took him from his family. So instead I haunt the house that once was mine, and listen to the children's laughter, and try to collect only little things that won't be missed.

Caroline M. Yoachim is the author of over two dozen short stories, including her Nebula–nominated novelette “Stone Wall Truth.” She is a graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, and her fiction has appeared in *Lightspeed*, *Asimov’s*, *Interzone*, and *Daily Science Fiction*, among other places. For more about Caroline, check out her website at carolineyoachim.com.

Falling Leaves

Liz Argall

Charlotte and Nessa met in Year Eight of Narrabri High School. Charlotte's family were licensed refugees from the burning lands and the flooded coast, not quite landed, but a step apart from refugees that didn't have dog tags.

Charlotte sat on the roof, dangled her legs off the edge and gazed at the wounded horizon, as she did every lunchtime. Nessa, recognizing the posture of a fellow animal in pain, climbed up to see what she could do. The mica in the concrete glittered and scoured her palms as she braced herself between an imitation tree and the wall and shimmied her way up.

She had to be careful not to break the tree, a cheap recycled–plastic genericus — who'd waste water on a decorative tree for children? The plastic bark squished beneath Nessa's sneakers, smelling of paint thinner and the tired elastic of granny underpants.

Nessa tried to act casual once she got to the top, banging her knee hard as she hauled herself over the ledge and ripping a fresh hole in her cargos. She took a deep breath, wiped her sweaty hands, and sat down next to Charlotte.

" 'Sup?" said Nessa.

"Go away." Charlotte kicked her feet against the wall and pressed her waxy lips together.

"You gonna jump?"

"No. I'm not an attention seeking whore like you," said Charlotte.

Nessa shrugged her shoulders, as if that could roll away the sting. Rolling with the punches was what she did. "You look sad."

Charlotte bared her teeth. "I said, I'm not like you. Leave me alone."

Nessa wanted to say, "Fuck you," but she didn't. Nessa wanted to find magic words to fix Charlotte in an impatient flurry. She couldn't. Nessa scratched her scars for a while and felt like puking, but she didn't think that would help either. Neither would hitting Charlotte's head against a wall and cracking Charlotte's head into happiness, although Nessa could imagine it so violently and brightly it felt like she'd done it. Nessa had banged her own head against walls to get the pain out of her head and chest, but it never worked — or rather it never worked for long enough, leading to a worse, moreish pain.

Nessa didn’t know what to do, so she just sat there, feeling chicken shit, until the bell summoned them into class.

Nessa found herself back up on the roof the next day, drumming her heels against the wall and reading a book speckled with dry rot. She didn’t know how to talk to Charlotte and talking to refugees, even ones with dog tags, was encouraged in a nauseated, be nice to lepers way. She didn’t know what to say, but she didn’t have any friends either, and the roof was nice and quiet.

Nessa drummed her heels and sent her mind somewhere else, while Charlotte thought about what it would be like to hit the rough tarred yard, how her body would crumple and wondered whether she’d die instantly or bleed out.

Nessa came back the next day, and the day after, to read her book and drum her heels. Nessa liked the roof; she wasn’t sure what she felt about Charlotte.

Charlotte hated Nessa’s intrusion. Charlotte hated the sound Nessa’s heels made against the concrete. She hated the way Nessa turned the page, licking thumb and forefinger, grasping the top page with a peculiar, showy precision. She hated the way Nessa smelled, cheap lemon scented body wipes off–gassing in the sun.

Charlotte thought about leaving, but dammit this was hers, and she wasn’t going to let some landed bitch take it from her. But then, after a while, on the days Nessa skipped school and didn’t climb up to claim her sun–warmed patch of concrete, Charlotte missed Nessa.

“Stop it,” snapped Charlotte after Nessa climbed up onto the rooftop and drummed her heels.

Nessa’s sense of peace snapped like elastic. The pain flinging her to her feet, “Fuck you! You don’t own the roof. I can sit where I like.”

“Just stop drumming your heels,” said Charlotte. “God! What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with me?” Nessa clenched her hands so tight her nails bit divots into her palms.

“I just asked you to quit making that sound,” said Charlotte.

“No you didn’t, you just screamed at me.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” yelled Charlotte.

“You were judging me. Like everyone else, sitting up here so high and mighty.”

“I’m not judging anyone,” lied Charlotte.

“I thought you were different,” said Nessa and she did not say *I thought you were safe*.

“I thought you were different,” said Charlotte and she did not say *and so I relaxed and snapped and you saw just how ugly I am.*

“I am different,” yelled Nessa.

“Well so am I!”

“Good.”

“Fine.”

Nessa let herself sigh, breathing out through her nose and softening her fighting stance. Charlotte looked down at Nessa’s spot, back up to Nessa and then away to the scrawl of ugly school children below.

Nessa sat down. She started kicking the wall with her heels and then stopped. They sat in silence. Eventually Nessa said, “I guess I over–reacted.”

“I dunno, maybe.” Charlotte shrugged her shoulders. Neither had a clear sense of normal; it made it hard to tell.

They greeted each other in public, acknowledging each other with monosyllabic grunts. Nodding heads, eye contact, perhaps a tiny smile. At some point they became friends. Though they never called it that, the f–word was too potent, impossible and delicate. Sometimes Nessa shared her water ration. When they were slick with refuse from ag class (code for picking over garbage) Charlotte gave Nessa a smear of the anti–bacterial enzyme her parents grew.

On their way to vocational training, a fancy name for free factory labor, a burner slung his arms over their shoulders. The stench of burnt hair and ripe sweat washed over them. He pressed his face close to theirs, eyebrows and lashes singed into uneven chunks, skull a mottled pink, scars on his chin where bumfluff had been burned back. “Are you girlfriends? Can I watch?”

Charlotte shrank away from his draping hands. Refugees that became burners carried their damage strong — keeping themselves hairless using whatever fire came to hand. Pretending to be something until school spat them out and the world mulched over them. She hated and envied the way they remembered and as a dog–tagged refugee she knew they hated her as a sellout.

Nessa grabbed the burner's throat and pushed him against the locker. "Can I watch you bleed?"

The burner tried to punch Nessa in the guts. Nessa felt something happen near her abdomen, but mostly she felt his neck push against her hand and the satisfying thud of his head slamming against the locker. She felt something warm trickle over her fingers and moved her hand up to find its source. She found a fresh cut in his scalp, jagged from the locker's edge, and she poked it.

"You fucking bitch!"

He punched her a few more times in the guts. She went for his eyes and nose with an open palm. He went down first.

Nessa walked away before he got up, and before the adrenaline crash took her legs away. The ground felt sloped, full of miniature stumbling blocks.

Charlotte hurried after and whispered in Nessa's ear, "What were you thinking? They'll come after us."

"Maybe solo," wheezed Nessa. "But he won't tell the gang, too embarrassing. Beat by a girl? There isn't enough fire to take away that shame."

"You're mad."

"Yeah."

It was hard to breathe and her guts twisted like snakes, but Nessa felt better than she had in months. An over–wound spring uncoiling at last, and if trouble came afterwards, well, at least she'd go down fighting. And it felt good to be able to protect someone, it made her feel like a person.

Nessa saw the burner a few times from a distance, but cat–like he pretended it had never happened. A few weeks later his face disappeared from the school. Part of her was disappointed.

§

When family got too hard to live with Charlotte and Nessa'd go bush and climb up into the Nandewar ranges — scraps of wilderness too steep or too dry to be cultivated. Let the scrub hold its own and save itself where it can, hold back the weeping salt that crawled up from the earth. The land did not care if they lived or died, but walking the land was a comfort; they became part of a grief bigger than themselves.

Lulled by the bush they often dreamt of running away, but they knew the color of fool's gold. Family held the ration books, the water rights, the ID cards that gave them human rights, and sleeping rough could get damn cold at night.

Once, they came across a wirringan. They damn near died of fright when he appeared in a place they thought of as theirs. He didn't eat them or anything. He just looked like an old man with a beard and gave them strong sweet tea. They sipped from chipped enamel cups as they sat cross–legged on the ground. He told them stories and warned them about places they should not go. They listened for a long time.

Sometimes they hiked up Mount Kaputar, climbing their way past huddled refugee camps, beggars, rain churches, and memorial stones. When they reached the top they yelled songs of love at the land and threw leaves of weather blessings into the wind.

§

One lazy noon, as they were sitting on the roof sharing a baked bean sandwich, Charlotte realized she wasn't sure when she'd last dreamt of dying. The surprise hit her so hard she laughed.

"What?" said Nessa, her own laugh punctuated by an unladylike spritz of orange baked bean. "Shit, sorry."

"Nothing," smiled Charlotte.

Nessa shook her head and smirked. Her baked beans, slowly melting through the sandwich, chose that moment to fall through the bread and land all over her lap. "Gah!"

"God, I'm sorry."

"S'not your fault," said Nessa as she danced to her feet and emptied the beans all over the rooftop. "Food and I don't like each other much anyway."

Nessa did her best to clean up her shorts using gum leaves that had blown in from a real tree. Charlotte scraped the baked beans off the roof, kicking with the side of her sneakers. Some beans landed on the head of a kid below.

Charlotte and Nessa fled and crouched behind an air conditioning unit on the other side of the roof.

"We are in so much trouble," giggled Charlotte.

“Only if we confess. Oldies see what they want to.”

Nessa ground her fingernails against each other and shrugged. Nessa and Charlotte let the concrete’s heat lull them into warm stupor.

“What do you want to be?” said Nessa, her voice suddenly ragged.

“Drover,” lied Charlotte. “You?”

Nessa pursed her lips and looked up at the empty blue sky. “Rich. I’d board New Venice and never look back.”

“Like that’d happen.”

Nessa smiled and wriggled her back against the airconditioner’s concrete cladding. “Don’t ruin my dream. Venice won’t float near here for a decade, anyway.”

“You don’t know what you want.”

“Neither do you. Drover? Really? I want to become a big bird and fly across the world.”

“Yeah, me to.”

Nessa poked Charlotte in the arm and grinned. They hugged each other. Charlotte breathed deeply, enjoying Nessa’s lemony scent.

§

The next spring Nessa got sick and hardly came to school. When she did she didn’t have the strength to climb up to the roof, and for the scant days they had together Charlotte had to climb down from her aerie. They huddled on the ugly concrete near the bike cage, accompanied by the over–ripe scent of banana skins and spilt Cack. Charlotte hated Nessa for being sick. She hated Nessa for abandoning her. She hated Nessa for being her friend and giving her something to lose.

On a sun–bleached Tuesday Charlotte fell from the roof. Slipped, leapt, she wasn’t sure. Sometimes it was hard to tell what she was thinking as she played with the edge.

Charlotte felt the concrete edge slip away from her. A numb serenity gave way to convulsive fear roiling up and down her body. Pain shredded her. Asphalt split her skin and bones.

She did not fall unconscious. People kept her awake, pulled her from the dark. She hated them. She hated their sounds. She hated her body. But she also hated the idea of dying and hate was the savage thread she held onto,

through broken teeth and flooding ribs, until the paramedics pierced her arm with something that drove sensation away.

If she'd fallen in Newcastle the only consideration would've been how fast would she die, and would her body still have shoes when it reached her family. She was lucky, lucky to be landed, lucky to live in a place with hospitals and schools and without famine.

The ambulance, with Charlotte's bloodied body slipped inside, rushed past Nessa's house. Nessa was eating cereal and watching replays of Sydney burning when the claxons whizzed by. She didn't know her best friend was being revived as the ambulance skidded past their lawn of grey gravel and seaglass.

Nessa didn't find out until the next day at assembly; she limped her way to school, dizzy with the exertion. The news hit Nessa like a gunshot. Her fingernails clawed deep into the scars on her arms. She bit the inside of her mouth and imagined slashing her throat open with a straight razor.

A pretty girl next to her sobbed and was comforted. "I… I sit next to her in… in History… w–w–why?" Nessa wanted to punch the girl in the face. Unwept tears shivered up and down her body, like ice, like fire. Nessa really wanted to punch that girl.

Nessa walked out. Teachers had become accustomed to the erratic attendance record of a sickly child. She walked to the hospital. She didn't like the grounds; the space was too open and too disorienting. People nursing saline bags squandered their rations smoking cigarettes close to the entrance, filling each churn of the rotating doors with a thin ooze of smoke. Nessa braved the reception, the tobacco scent washed away by the sharp smell of bleach and alcohol wipes.

"I'm here to see Charlotte," she said firmly.

"What is her last name, sweetie?" The receptionist wore a tie with cartoon characters on it, and had ugly teeth.

Nessa pursed her lips, awash with shame. She had forgotten, how could she forget Charlotte's last name? Time slowed and her eyes flicked from the crack on the receptionist's left incisor to the crack in the linoleum. "Her name is Charlotte. She fell. Fell real bad." Nessa felt like she was some pathetic little kid. She tried hard not to cry and kicked the floor with her shoe. "Charlotte."

The receptionist patted Nessa on the shoulder. Nessa didn't punch the receptionist. "Don't worry, duck. I'll see if I can find her." The

receptionist pulled up details on his monitor. He tapped through a few screens and then sucked his lips inwards. “Are you family?”

“No.”

“Do you have a grownup with you?”

“No.” Nessa scowled. The last thing she needed was someone treating her like some kid. She turned on her heel and walked away. The receptionist called out something to her, but she didn’t hear it.

Nessa went home. The key under the paving stone was missing, so she climbed in through the window. She wondered if this was the season to die. She wondered if she would be allowed that escape, and the thought scared her. Instead she hid inside books until her bones felt like they were going to push through her skin.

The next day everyone at school was wearing jeans as a fundraiser to help Charlotte’s family with the medical bills. Nessa was wearing baggy black shorts and hadn’t brought any money. She wanted to crawl into a hole and die, but that felt derivative.

She picked a fight with a kid, because she didn’t like how angry he was. He walked with a snarl, strutting around like he’d pissed on every tree and sneering at girls who should know their place. She didn’t like the way he got in her face, but she only got one good hit in. His fists made her head bleed and her vision went muzzy as she hit the dirt.

Worse than losing the fight, teachers caught them and actually gave a shit for a change. Her people weren’t great people, but they were landed. He was refugee scum. She got a bandaid. He was expelled.

She hated them for that. Of all the things they didn’t see, all the things she took the blame for, and the one time they came to the rescue was when it was untrue and unfair. She didn’t even get the chance to apologize.

Two weeks later Charlotte was able to receive visitors, although her status was still tenuous. Charlotte’s head was shaved and garish staples held bits of skin together. Her body was a living bruise and her jaw had been wired shut.

Nessa said “Hi.” Charlotte waved a finger and blinked. Nessa brushed Charlotte’s fingers with her own, scared of the physical contact, scared she would make the tubes come out or something terrible happen. Nothing terrible happened. The wild part of Nessa’s brain had the sudden urge to jump up and down on the bed, and fling herself across Charlotte’s chest.

“Would you like me to read to you?”

The corner of Charlotte’s mouth quirked.

Nessa read, self–conscious and awkward, from a book she’d grabbed from the library, “The Drover’s Wife.” Charlotte’s grey pallor eased and took on a warmer hue as Nessa read. Her faltering breath became a less ragged counterpoint to the hushed melody of piped oxygen.

“Why am I always waiting for you?” muttered Nessa.

But Charlotte had already fallen asleep and was beyond words. Nessa put the book into her bag as if it were some oily thing. She wiped her hands and watched Charlotte rest.

“Why wouldn’t you let me protect you?”

Nessa felt stupid, selfish and ugly. The chill violently crystalized and she didn’t care… she was all those things, so she might as well be those things. “It’s not fair.” Her fingertips brushed Charlotte’s. “I hate you.”

Charlotte sighed in her sleep, and for a moment Nessa did not see a bruised friend healing. Nessa saw Charlotte smiling smugly, so satisfied by all the pain and harm she’d caused, sleeping like a baby while those around her wept.

“Don’t you hear me?” hissed Nessa, her lips almost biting Charlotte’s ear. “I hate you.”

Charlotte’s eyes opened to half slits and she made confused sounds.

Nessa grabbed Charlotte by the shoulder and shook her, shook her like it was screaming. “I hate you.” Charlotte’s body arched convulsively, her eyes pierced Nessa with their pain and confusion.

Nessa ran, ignoring the dismayed nurses, stumbling down the stairs and vomited out into summer’s long bleeding sunset. Nessa ran, fast and fierce with her face to the wind, the hot air drying her tears to salt and sparing her from crying. Her eyelashes clumped into small, hurt spears.

It was dark by the time she got to school, the metallic tang of a dry storm building in the air. Nessa climbed up to the top of the roof, picking around fresh sharp barbwire made it difficult. She sat where Charlotte had always been and looked down. The pavement seemed smugly bland, no stain, no chipping to show it had crushed Charlotte to itself.

Rage, wet and salty, ran down Nessa’s face. “I hate you. I hate you. I hate you,” she spat. “I will never be your friend. I will never…” Nessa choked on the words and the raw hurting truth. “I will never be anyone’s friend. Every thing, every word, every person, every feeling is a lie. And I am better off without you.”

And as Nessa said “better off without you,” she saw as clear as daylight Charlotte slipping into death; how her words had made truth. She huddled next to the air conditioning unit and convulsed with the depth of her sins, and she begged the empty sky for forgiveness. Her teeth chattered as she mumbled “please be ok,” over and over until her lips felt numb and blue.

Eventually, storm past and clothes wet, Nessa clambered down from the roof. The barbwire scratched her arms and legs, biting and catching on old scars. It was almost accidental, emotion had made her clumsy, and she pretended the pain didn’t make her feel better. The taste of blood and tears blurred as she sucked her injured palm and returned to her average house and absent parents.

§

Nessa spent the next week waiting for news that Charlotte had died. She waited for the police to come and haul her out of school for murder.

A week went by and Charlotte was not dead, but Nessa’s shame lingered and coated her lungs. She bought razorblades twice. Her mind traced their edges, but she managed to throw them away without opening the packet. She had never smoked a cigarette, but the pain of separation was similar. Unlike smokes, she couldn’t get razorblade patches to take the edge off. She wanted people to know she was strong, strong in staying clean, but she stayed quiet. She didn’t want people to call her an attention–seeking whore.

Charlotte’s parents came to the school. They looked shrunken and ordinary. She held her breath as they walked past, but they didn’t notice her. They just stood up at the podium and thanked everyone very much for helping them during this terrible time, after such a terrible accident. Part of Nessa felt hurt, why didn’t they try to talk to her? Why didn’t they yell?

Charlotte’s parents accepted the cheque for $257.13 with heads bowed. Nessa felt instant rage: 257 dollars? That was it? Nessa’s rage was tempered by her own inadequacy. What right did she have to be angry when she had contributed so little? She raged at the gratitude Charlotte’s parents showed, put on display like some freak show, prostrating themselves for tips.

As they left Nessa pushed her way out of the assembly and followed them.

“I’m sorry,” said Nessa.

Charlotte’s parents looked at her with confusion, they made her think of little grey dolls, tumbled in the washing machine too many times. “I’m sorry?” echoed Charlotte’s father.

“Is Charlotte ok? I visited and… and… is she ok?”

“Are you Charlotte’s friend?” said Charlotte’s mother.

Nessa bit her lip. “My name is Nessa.”

“Nessa, yes, I think Charlotte mentioned you…” Charlotte’s father nodded and shook his head.

“Charlotte’s doing much better. Thank you for visiting.” Charlotte’s mother looked to the ground and flickered up again, eyes as filmy as her thin cardigan. “We… Charlotte’s never had a lot of friends. Please, visit her again.”

“We mustn’t impose on the girl,” said Charlotte’s father.

§

Nessa found Burners out by the bicycle cage. Their leader was watching younger ones take turns putting their hand under the lens of a magnifying glass — silently sweating as the dot of light bubbled their skin.

“Burner, respect,” she said twitching her chin up for a moment.

The Burner leader looked her up and down for a long minute. He wasn’t wearing much, ripped jeans, boots, shirt without buttons. And he was hairless, eyebrows, arms, legs, all dotted with scars from fire and knife. Not many made it all the way. A lean, muscular sixteen with eyes of forty.

“ ’spect, landed psycho,” he said.

One side of Nessa’s mouth twitched, it felt good to be recognized. “Does it help?”

“You work with what you’ve got.”

“What’s the in? I could do with some penance.”

“We don’t need tourists.”

A young one pulled her hand out from under the magnifying glass, panting heavy and trying to suck the pain away.

“I’m not,” said Nessa.

“You’re landed. You weren’t there.”

Nessa wanted to protest, but the leader cut her off.

“Enjoy it. You don’t have to burn. So don’t.”

The young one was having trouble controlling her pain and started to cry. The Burner pulled her onto his lap and hugged her. The young one's cries became open throated sobs. Her tears splashed his chest. He kissed the top of her head as he cradled her.

Nessa stood there for an awkward moment, then walked away. Behind her she heard tears and soft sounds of comfort.

§

Nessa snuck into the hospital. She didn't need to, but choosing when she was seen made her feel powerful. Charlotte looked even more like a mess, bruises and swelling shifting into new patterns. The air was pungent with Betadine and wet wounds.

"Why'd you jump?" said Nessa.

"I fell."

"I know what it's like, to want to die," said Nessa. "Why'd you jump?"

Charlotte's gaze flickered to the door.

"It's just me," said Nessa. Charlotte kept her eyes on the door, but Nessa was patient, letting the silence stretch and pull between them.

Eventually Charlotte said, "I can't bear the way people look at me."

"Before? Or now?"

"Yes." Silence grew like a wave, Charlotte's shame a dam against her mouth. The silence sucked and created whirlpool eddies until it was Nessa's turn to speak. Razor words shifting, perhaps kinder, perhaps crueler, they scraped as they came out.

"I know what it's like to want to die. The itch. I don't know what hurts worse. The way things hurt or a numbness that burns."

"It's not like that," said Charlotte. She couldn't tell if she was lying, her body hurt and it was hard to breathe.

"The way people's eyes slide around when they see me," continued Nessa. "See my arms, call me selfish, call me an attention seeking whore."

"You're not."

"You've said it." Nessa's voice was calm and pragmatic. "You don't lie."

"I didn't mean it. I was angry, I was scared." Charlotte's ribs hurt along every break; blood pressed against the staples in her face. "I'm a bad person."

It was Nessa's turn to feel stabbed. "No." Then the pain eased. "Maybe you're just braver. Maybe I am just an attention–seeking whore. It's strange, it's selfish… Even after you jumped, I wasn't brave enough."

"It's braver to live."

Nessa twisted her mouth and shook her head. "Then maybe I'm tired of being brave."

Charlotte squirmed under the sheets. The painkillers were wearing off and everything felt harder, foggier. "We have to be brave. You have to."

Nessa held Charlotte's hand as the pain came and went in waves, building like the tide coming in. After fourty–five minutes nurses came and gave Charlotte an injection that took her away from pain and into sleep.

§

"I'm tired of feeling angry."

Nessa stood under a cold hose, felt the pounding ice water envelop her. Felt the ice wash her clean and find a quiet core. She moved slowly as she poured the buckets of water back into the tank and added bleach — ready for the next shower. The water was turning sour after too many uses — only the insanely wealthy used water once. Even twisting the cap on the bleach bottle felt holy, as if all emotion had been washed from her.

The night air was cool, and the wind pulled at her damp hair. She walked through the streets in a white shift and bare feet; her pocket full of presents. She let her face relax and her body drift, not even her posture was combat ready. Fire was clear, fire was easy, but she would learn gentleness.

The tree had been cut down, but not yet cleared away. She propped its plastic branches against the wall and climbed to the roof. The tree slid away as her feet sought the gaps between barbs on the wire.

She gazed up at the river of stars and spun around and around, nostalgic for a youth she'd only seen in pictures. Dizzy and luminous she made her way to the rooftop's edge.

"Look!" she held her arms wide. "I'm here."

She breathed deep and dug her hands into her pockets. She pulled out leaves of sweet weather blessing and threw them to the wind and the sky.

Leaves fell down, leaves of words, of "Look." "See." "Feel." "Love."

“I’m sorry.”
“I’m sorry.”
“I’m sorry.”
“I don’t want to be angry.”
“I’m scared.”
“There is more than this.”

§

The wind pulls at her arms. She feels naked to the sky. She could spin and spin forever. But she does not fall.

§

Charlotte will be a long time recovering. Scars run from nose to jaw and across the ridge of her eyebrow. One cheekbone will always be higher than the other; the hair on her head regrows unevenly over scarring.

The hospital will release her early. Only so many beds, she should be grateful she has her life, her brains, be grateful she can walk.

Charlotte will hobble around the house with an arm in a sling and two ankle casts. The doc will say complete bed rest, her ankles, hips and legs need to heal, but who else will make dinner?

Charlotte’s parents will always be working, fresh debt to pay down on top of the old. Charlotte will fall on the kitchen floor and scream with pain and want to die, but she won’t. The neighbors won’t hear her shouts and she will lie on the ground for two hours.

Nessa will help where she can, and sometimes she will succeed and sometimes she’ll fail. Nessa will promise not to get in any more fights. When she breaks that promise her tears will be hot and her teeth bloody. It will be a long time before she makes that promise again.

They will climb up Mount Kaputar. Charlotte’s bones will still be healing. It will be a staggering ordeal and more than once they’ll think they won’t make it. They’ll climb their way past huddled refugee camps, fake clevermen, and an Auntie will give Charlotte a chew that helps the pain.

When they reach the top they’ll yell everything they want and fear and hate and love. They will laugh and cry and feel the hot sun on their faces.

They will hold onto that moment, memorizing the edges of joy, of love, of home. It will be a moment they hold onto in the dark times ahead and when the razor’s edge calls. They will be brave.

They will throw down sweet weather blessings and they will sing songs to a land that will one day be whole again.

Photo by: www.michaelbauerphotography.com

In addition to reading her work here (perhaps the poem “Casanova Clay” or the short story “Mermaid’s Hook”) Liz’s short stories can be found in places like *Strange Horizons*, *Daily Science Fiction* and *This is How You Die: Stories of the Inscrutable, Infallible, Inescapable Machine of Death*. Liz creates the webcomic *Things Without Arms and Without Legs* and writes love songs to inanimate objects. Her previous incarnations include circus manager, refuge worker, artists’ model, research officer for the Order of Australia Awards, farm girl, and extensive work in the not–for–profit sector. She has a website http://lizargall.com/

Not Smart, Not Clever

E. Saxey

The lecture theatre I'm trying to enter holds three hundred, but the security doors only admit two people at a time. Smart. I wait with the gang — Isha, Barb and Zach — in the underground atrium.

"Lin," Isha asks me, "you totally don't have to tell me, but are you on brain–rec?"

"No. I mean, not yet, anyway."

"I am," Isha admits.

The gang gasp. Isha is normally squeaky–clean.

"I didn't cheat! I was on face–rec," Isha explains, "but then I was writing my Decadence essay and the face–rec didn't know who I was, because I was wearing a hat. So the department put me on brain–rec, too." She frowns. "It's not fair. It was my thinking hat."

The gang coos. Isha is adorable.

The gang were thrown together in a hall of residence in their first year of University. Isha is sweet, Barb is melodramatic and Zach is nerdy. Not well–suited, they nevertheless became fiercely loyal and emotionally pot–bound. Now, in their second year, they're renting a house together. I'm shy. I'm not one of the gang, yet. I'm Zach's girlfriend.

"What do they do if you fail the brain–rec?" Isha asks.

"They've got truth drugs," says Barb.

This is a peril of studying literature: scientific illiteracy. I don't tell them that truth drugs don't work. I don't want a reputation for being a know–it–all.

We don't discuss the subject we're studying. Maybe it's too personal, or too easy to say something clueless. So we keep talking about plagiarism, probation, punishment. A vision of a grubby grail hovers before us: undetectable plagiarism.

"My mate said his friend's, like, cracked the code," Zach tells us. "He's not doing any work, just twiddling his thumbs, and he's going to stroll out with a First."

Isha reminds everyone that plagiarism is foul and most unnatural. I say something bland about fear and failure.

Barb bellows at me: "You don't have to worry about failing, you swot!" Then backpedals: "You're totally not a swot, sorry." My family's Chinese,

and perhaps Barb doesn't want to stereotype me. But it's fair enough, I'm pretty swotty. I don't talk about it, but the girls have guessed that I still live with my parents, and they're academically pushy.

Complaints about how much everyone is paying in fees, how much everyone is working, how much everyone is expected to write, are passed up and down the queue like a bag of crisps.

"What did you get for the Decadence essay, Lin?" asks Isha.

I drop my head. Zach hugs me. We've reached the card–slots and cameras of the security doors.

"Don't worry about it, Lin." Barb says. "Decadence is the least of our fucking problems."

She swipes her card to and fro, fast as a hummingbird. We all shove through the doors together.

Barb issues a significant invitation: "You should come to Club Sandwich at the Union with us. It's horrible."

Whenever I pass the Union it smells of bleach, beer and vomit.

"I totally would," I say, "But I've always got a lecture the next day, first thing."

"Swot!"

I scan the rows of the lecture theatre. I can see twenty women who look a bit like me. Six of us have the same hairstyle. A few of them are wearing gold eye–shadow. I might try that. I tend to copy people. I wish I could be more original, but it feels risky.

Zach and I sit next to one another, and our knees touch as Zach gets out his department–issue device, logs on and thumb–prints in to type his notes. I crack open my paper notebook, and he smiles because I'm old fashioned.

§

My ex–boyfriend, Linton, became entranced by plagiarism.

He was writing a doctorate on a handful of black American writers and their inter–textual influences. Doctorates are very specific. But they need momentum to get going. So you generalise a little, add a slug of confirmation bias, so you can believe you've got something huge.

Linton began to see inter–textuality everywhere. Anything 'new' grew out of revision, transformation and theft. We weren't just standing on the

shoulders of giants; the giants threw us in the air, and we hauled them up with us. He told me when we met: we dance with giants in the air, man.

I probably encouraged his exaggeration. Relationships need momentum to get going, too.

Around the same time, Linton's University made him sign a four–page document stating that he wouldn't plagiarise.

It took him a week to reason himself into it. He got philosophical and then incredulous and then paranoid and then did them all again, drunk. He argued it out with his tutor, and his tutor said "Yes, but Linton. Seriously." He found that the text of the anti–plagiarism document had been copied directly from another institution's anti–plagiarism agreement and rolled on his bedroom floor with hysteria.

But he signed it. Then the bad faith ate at him.

He started to talk a lot about undetectable plagiarism.

First, he was going to write software that would generate essays.

"It's a problem crying out for a smart solution. You know what smart is?"

"I'm smart."

"No, you're *clever*. *Smart* is when you have huge datasets, and a bit of processing power. You ask a question, the smart–thing pulls in data and filters it and personalises the output. Like, you ask *where can I buy*…"

"Dinner for my girlfriend, who helped me with my thesis today?"

"Yeah, dinner! The smart–thing checks restaurant locations, menus, reviews. Now, there are databases full of essays, articles… If I create something smart, it can pull them in, and answer an essay question."

" 'Is Hamlet mad' isn't the same as 'Can I have extra mozzarella'."

"In some ways, it's identical."

Linton programmed a simple Markov bot. He fed it essays and the bot learned their rules. Then he asked it to churn out new essays, unoriginal but unique.

The new essays were like a child babbling down a crackly phone line. Linton swore and started again.

§

Later that day I hear Isha crying in her room. She can't find any relevant material for her essay, and the deadline's at midnight. I offer to help her.

“Would you really?”

“It’ll take an hour. I can teach you how to use the databases.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. That wouldn’t be fair, you’ve got your own work—”

“Buy me a pint at Club Sandwich, some time.”

Isha plugs in her dedicated device. An oval light shines up at her: the face–rec. She isn’t wearing her thinking hat, this time. I stay away from the camera so as not to confuse it and risk her reputation. She sticks two cheap sensor suckers to her temples, embarrassed, and tucks the wires into her cardigan. Brain–rec. I’ve not seen it in action, before.

I talk her through the big databases in our subject area, the differences between them. I set her some test exercises and make her a cup of tea while she completes them. Then on to the fun part — refining search terms, pinning down page numbers, whittling irrelevancies.

At the end of it, it’s taken two hours, and we have six good articles, and she knows how to do it for herself next time.

“You’re sooo clever,” she says, correctly.

“Well, I’m smart. Just, you know, ask if you need anything else.”

“You’re so kind.” She sounds uncertain, as though I’m trespassing on her territory. I want to reassure her: I’m shy and swotty but I’m not really sweet. She can keep sweet. And she doesn’t know how kind I’m being.

§

Linton studied the leading text–matching service. It besmirched the white innocent page of the essay by highlighting unauthorised quotes, each separate source in a different colour. A plagiarised essay would light up like a Christmas tree.

Linton made a programme which turned all the Es in an essay into something that looked like an E but wasn’t, so that the text–matching service couldn’t recognise it. The service became a blustering idiot: Fourscor3 y3ars and t3n? Never heard of it! I hav3 a dr3am?!

Essays treated with Linton’s programme had a 0% match, were white as snow.

“But that’s just as suspicious as a 100% match,” Linton admitted.

Linton made a synonym swapper. He told it that *the plot of the Sensation novel, in essence, owes much to the Gothic novel*. It told him that *the scam of the funky tingle, in pith, is in hock to the Barbaric quirky.*

“It sounds good, yeah?”

“It sounds like an encyclopaedia with a head injury.”

“It’s getting there.”

Linton tried to teach code to write like people. Like hung–over, distracted, overworked amateurs. Like students.

Linton realised that he was trying to simultaneously solve all the major problems of language and computing and creativity, to invent a product he could never sell.

§

My phone wakes me at just past midnight, and I can’t remember which scruffy room I’m in. The poster of Tim Berners–Lee’s benign eyes (‘THIS IS FOR EVERYONE’) doesn’t narrow it down much. I slap the phone to silence it, and when my disorientation passes, I slip out from under Zach’s arm to talk in the hallway.

Barb is phoning me, crying, from the library. The results from her last essay were released onto her device at 00:00.

The mark isn’t what she’d wanted.

“It’ll be on my transcript for ever! I’ll get suspended!”

I soothe.

“It’s alright for you! You’re going to get a First!” She wails for a bit: starve in a gutter, go on the game.

I interrupt. “If you come home and sleep now, I’ll talk to your tutor with you tomorrow.”

“Swear?”

“Print me off a copy of the version you submitted and put it under Zach’s door. And don’t write anything about it on your device — no messages, no notes, OK? See you at eight in the kitchen.”

She is snottily grateful. I return to bed.

“What was that?” Zach asks, wrapping his skinny arms round me.

“Barb. Didn’t get the grade she needed on Modernism.”

“You’re the good deed fairy, you are,” he says, rambling, half–awake.

I feel his arms slacken in sleep. I stay awake, waiting for Barb to slide the essay under the door. I build the case for the defence.

§

Barb swipes us into the Tower and we climb the concrete stairs. I review my longhand pencil notes. She fiddles with her device. I want to remind her not to drop it; it's a nightmare to get the department to replace them.

We have a ten o'clock appointment with her tutor. Barb has drawn heavy lines round her big eyes. She'd better not use her wiles on him.

"What are you going to tell him?" I ask.

She starts her panic breathing but I grip her arm and she says: "That I *did* read a lot of critical material, and I drew pretty heavily on one source —"

"Who?"

"Mitchell, 1980. But I didn't understand how to reference it."

"OK. And don't ask him to change the grade."

"But that's what I need!"

"Yes, but it's rude to ask. Just say 'I'm worried about getting into trouble.' That means 'change my grade'."

"He's going to flay me!"

"This is the least of your fucking problems," I tell her, to reassure her. She looks shocked, and I remember that I don't usually swear in front of her. I reach past her and knock on the office door.

I only catch a glimpse of him, as she enters: a young man in corduroy, elbows on knees and fingers steepled. Playing at being an academic. The name on the door isn't his; he's a PhD student borrowing the office. This year is the first time he's taught. I'm not psychic — this is all public information, if you cross–reference. He's under–trained and underpaid and scared that he hasn't got it right. Maybe the wiles would work.

I'm doomed for a certain term to walk the corridor and eavesdrop. I move far enough away from the door that they won't hear me speaking, and I listen in through Barb's microphone.

He has a soothing voice, impersonating other people who have taught him. "…but Barbara, it's a very respectable grade!"

"I'm *worried* about getting into trouble," Barb says, shrill in my ear.

When he speaks — "Why would you be worried?" — I know she's infected him with her panic. He's afraid he's failed to spot something, and there will be a referral, a process.

"Tell him about Mitchell," I say into her earpiece.

She tells him.

“Tell him you put it in the bibliography.”

“I *did* put it in the bibliography!” Barb retorts, a loud defensive non sequitur, which is even better — no tutor wants to deal with a mental health crisis. Barb rephrases herself: “I mean, I did put it in the bibliography, but I didn’t know how to reference it properly…”

The tutor sighs with relief and spends ten minutes discussing ways of acknowledging sources. He’s pretty good. I jot some of his tips in my notebook.

“Make sure he’s going to change the grade,” I remind Barb. “You’re still worried…”

“I’m still *worried* that I’m going to get into trouble.”

“It’s a fine grade, it won’t affect…”

“Mention probation,” I prompt.

“I’ll go on probation and they’ll make me work in the cells, and I can’t, I’m claustrophobic.”

“The cells?”

“I mean the Supported Learning Unit.”

“Oh, I see. I’m not sure whether I can actually —”

I want to barge the door open and show him. I have to instruct him through Barb: “Tell him your friend had his grade changed.”

Double puppetry: I work Barb, she works her tutor. “My friend’s tutor put something, hang on, he wrote *post–tutorial grade adjustment* on the — what? The online feedback sheet…” She dips in and out of fluency, sounds like she’s possessed. I think: I can’t keep doing this. As soon as the procedure’s complete, I yank Barb out of my ear and leave her to say her own goodbyes.

Barb catches me up on the stairs.

“Why did you give me a fucking A essay, anyway?”

“You wanted better grades.”

“I wanted a C+! Maybe a B.” That single A, in amongst Barb’s Cs and Ds, would have triggered an avalanche of new anti–plagiarism measures. Hopefully, we’ve averted that.

“It was a B–, at best. Your tutor’s a soft marker, doesn’t want his students crying all over him.”

She’s glaring at me, but she still needs me. We have a pre–existing appointment that evening, because she owes the department an essay on psychoanalysis in contemporary women’s fiction.

And it’s fine. I don’t like her, either.

The ones I don’t like, I do everything for them. I run all the searches and don’t show them how to use the databases. I steal their style and I tidy their grammar, but I don’t tell them what a comma splice is or how to use a semi–colon. They bob along. Sometimes they think what I do for them looks easy, and they try to write something of their own; their grades dip down, and they come back to me, begging. But their arrogance, their attempts to break away, keep them on the borderline between passing and failing. In their final year, around Easter, they realise everything hangs on their dissertation. They just can’t risk doing it themselves. And by then, nobody else knows their style. By then, I *am* their style.

And I fleece them. If you’ve paid so much in fees, how much more would you pay, to not fail your entire degree?

It’s not entirely personal. I like Isha, but it helps to have a lot of goodwill in my cover–house. I dislike Barb, but it also helps to have someone in my cover–house who’s in as deep as possible. Not handy tips for the promise of a pint. The full service.

§

Barb is still glaring at me when we settle in her room for the evening’s work. I have pages of handwritten preparatory notes. (Never type anything, never use a device. Never leave a trail. Electronic document barely exist but they never stop barely existing.)

The log–in takes forever. Password and thumb–print and luminous face, suckers on her temples like extra nipples, and more passwords and a voice–check.

“It’s measuring my stress levels, isn’t it? How should I be? Should I be calm, or terrified, or…” She’s nervous because she’s cheating, she’s calm because I’m going to write her an impeccable C+ essay. She’s nervous because she’s not sure if she’s nervous enough.

“It doesn’t test stress.”

“Of course it does. Doesn’t it?”

“How would they know how stressed you ought to be?” I imagine complex charts, with variables for parental income, bar job, caffeine and tranquilisers, with a slider to adjust for how close to the deadline the student has started typing. “It’s checking your brain activity.”

“Oh God, it’ll know…”

“It’s not that sensitive. We’ll be fine. I’ll explain it, bit by bit, you’ll write an essay plan, then I dictate the essay.”

She frowns. She wants it to be over quicker.

“It’ll be useful if you understand the argument, in case they pull you in for a viva.”

“They won’t, will they?”

“They’ll ask to see the essay plan, first. But they viva 5% of second year essays.”

Barb looks sick, so I give her a pep talk: “This way, you understand what you’re writing about. Which is good, because we want to learn, not just get the degree. Don’t we?” A little humour, there.

The brain–rec is incredibly crude, and my precautions should fool it utterly. Its outputs look like crayon drawings. The detection tech always fails, and sometimes I think it fails because it’s striving for the impossible, the philosophical. A sniffer dog, or an honest gumshoe, would ask: are there phrases which match other sources? Was this file originally created eight years ago, in the wrong country? Simple things.

Detectors ask impossible things. What does a lie sound like? How does an honest man breathe? They want to photograph the shadow as it falls across the soul.

I’ve reread one of Barb’s essays to catch her style. I’ll drop in ‘furthermore’ every page, weave in some multi–sub–clause sentences deliberately. But most of my imitation is intuitive artistry. I take on her crooked way of thinking, and her writing comes naturally to me.

I consult my notes. “OK, so: the phantom in psychoanalysis! The phantom comes back, but he doesn’t want to set things right, he just wants to continue a cover–up…”

I could write a better piece. I don’t build an elegant argument, stack up unique evidence, deliver a killer punch. It’s only a second year essay, and it can’t be higher than a C+. I wish I could write more for the final–year students, but I can only write for the modules which are taught through large lectures. I’d be spotted in small seminar discussions, despite my boring hair and my boring clothes.

The polite term for what I do is ghost–writing. Sometimes I’m ghostly. When I creep into lecture theatres. When I need someone to swipe me in and out of buildings, to pick up their device, to type for me, as though I

can’t touch objects. When the lecturer says, ‘Any questions?’ and I’m bursting with questions, but I can’t have a voice. When I see my face reflected in the screen of someone else’s device and I pull away before the face–rec can catch me.

But the writing itself doesn’t make me feel like a ghost. I’m shaping, knitting, hacking, building, and never more alive.

If there’s a ghost in me, it’s my conscience, which is undetectable by current tech.

Suddenly, Barb cries out. I peer over at the screen of her device.

Another window has opened, an image in moody blues with splats of mustard yellow. A blue figure solidifies out of the general fog, and another shrinks back and melts away. At the foot of the screen lie two twitching red blots.

I jump away from the screen and scramble towards the window. I wrench it open, and Barb is yelling, terrified, and springs up after me but is tethered to her device by her brain–wires and drags it half across the room. I wave my hands to keep her away from me. I lean out of the window as far as I can, sitting on the sill, out into the cold air, away from the device.

Because that screen — which I shouldn’t have seen — was a combination of heart monitoring and thermal imaging. I didn’t know the devices could do such things.

I signal to Barb, hand over my mouth, pointing to the floor: sit down, shut up.

She scowls. She points at me, then makes two of her fingers run like little legs, across her other palm and off the edge, peddling in mid–air. She thought I was going to jump out of the window. I don’t let myself laugh in case the device is audio–recording.

I tell her with gestures to put the earpiece back in. I can whisper the rest through my phone from here on the windowsill. It’ll be awkward, and annoying, and my arse hurts already from balancing.

When we’re done, Barb pulls the sweaty suckers off her head, and I hobble out of the door before she can speak.

§

And Isha is haunting the hallway and she calls after me: “I know what you do. I heard you and Barb talking about it.” The sound insulation in student houses is terrible.

She is shaking with indignation. Maybe she’ll try to throw me out of the house.

“You need to write my Victorian essay for me, or I’ll report you.”

Sweet little Isha! The worm turns! She’s been nervous lately, and her perfectionism drags her grades down.

I mentally review my portfolio. I’m running some students at another college, across town. They bring enough money for me to live on. But it would be a shame to lose Barb, and the other students at this University, before they mature — before the big pay–off from their dissertations next year.

“I’ll write it, but you need to pay me.”

“You’re a cheat.”

“And you’re a blackmailer! Except I’m not going to write for free, so you’re not even a successful blackmailer.” I’m amused because it reminds me of an old joke — we’ve already established what kind of women we are; now we’re just haggling.

“That’s different!”

“How the fuck is it different?” She looks more shocked at my swearing than my ghost–writing. I’ve been a good shy swot. I try reasoning. “Let’s start again. You don’t want the person who writes your coursework to be pissed off at you. That’s just —” Fuck–witted, I think, but I keep it clean. “That’s handing me a weapon.”

“You couldn’t report me. They’d kick you out, as well.”

“Kick me out of where?”

“The University.”

“Bless you. I’m not a student here.”

We’ve known one another for a year, practically lived together for the last six months. She counters surprisingly quickly. “Well, where–ever you’re studying. I’ll tell them, they’ll kick you out.”

The solipsism of youngsters protects me all the time, but sometimes it’s staggering. Knowing it means the loss of this whole house, I say:

“Isha, I’m not a student. I haven’t been a student for years.”

I duck into Zach’s room while she’s still blinking.

§

Linton got bitter. Academia was a pyramid selling scheme. We'd polished our PhDs, churned out scholarly articles which nobody read, and taught undergraduates for minimum wage. But there weren't any jobs for us. I had a couple of interviews for lectureships but — possibly because I looked so young — nobody took me seriously.

Linton would wake in the middle of the night gripped by new ways to plagiarise. He stopped thinking of selling his solutions, and planned to give them away for free, the keys to the ivory tower.

Meanwhile, I marked hundreds of essays in which the stolen sections stood out like dolmen on a dull landscape.

I stopped listening to Linton, because it seemed simple to me: the most rigorous tech couldn't beat slippery, dishonest flesh. But the most eloquent, creative tech couldn't persuade a human marker, either. It was stalemate. To write a convincing fake essay, you'd need to be human and on the ground. Attend the lectures, collect the hand–outs, read the lecturer's favourite sources. Remind yourself how students thought and sounded. You'd have to spend time with them, but that would be easy. Their social circles were passionate but weirdly permeable. In fact, if you hooked up with one of them, you'd have an instant sample group.

Linton's mania progressed so far that when his final submission deadline arrived, he had nothing to submit. I had to write his thesis. I wrote it with him, at first, standing over him, questioning him, kept him typing and talking. When he flagged, I wrote it for him.

We worked, night and day, for a fortnight, and then parted. He was rotten, or he wouldn't have let me do it; our relationship was rotten, and I had to end it. (I don't mean to duck the blame, but I still can't decide. Was I already rotten, or I wouldn't have done it? Or did I, during that fortnight — living a double life, over double–length days — bend too far, and become rather more flexible than before?)

"You could alter the students' genetic code," Linton woke me to tell me, one day in that endless fortnight.

"Shut up."

"You could make them fluoresce if their stress levels reached a certain point."

"Go to sleep. Some of us have to write your thesis in the morning."

“Turn them into human lie detectors. You could switch off the lights in a lecture theatre, shout ‘who’s been cheating’, and boom — pull in all the glowing students.”

“Hang on — isn’t that a detection idea?” I asked.

Concealing plagiarism and detecting it went hand in hand; Linton had been watching the detectives so he could design his dodges. When his fascination became all–consuming, he forgot which side he was on, and just marvelled at the fight. After he passed his viva, after we broke up, Linton got a job with one of the biggest plagiarism detection companies. He writes impeccably original copy for their publicity.

When I got my own doctorate, I went into the plagiarism business as well. I didn’t have a vendetta, like Linton. I just wanted to keep learning, and writing, and if there was nobody who wanted to read my ideas, there were certainly people who wanted to buy them.

I’m smart. I have a small, high–speed processor, and access to huge datasets. I can pull in information, quickly filter it and tailor my outputs. But I’m also clever.

Students approach me warily, broaching the subject outside the library, and they always think there’s a single solution: a magic formula, a cloak of invisibility. Managing their disappointment became part of my job, breaking it to them gently that the only way to write an essay is to write an essay.

§

Zach is sitting with his back to me, so it takes me a moment to see that he’s unpacking my bag. He’s heard me arguing with Isha. He’s looking for evidence. Clever.

He’s laid all the faces out on the bed, side by side. And of course they look creepy, like a decapitated choir. Which is unfair, because they’re purely pragmatic. The face–rec is, indeed, stupid, and I can pop on a mask and pass as one of my clients long enough to type their essay for them. The faces are just colour photocopies, with pieces of elastic, not weird rubber masks or anything.

There’s a trio of students from China; they pay huge fees, they’re not used to this country’s referencing conventions, and nobody’s got time to explain it to them. There are four incredibly posh but not very literate

finalists from the Home Counties. A couple of mature students. Each name is written in pencil on the back of its face.

“You’ve just been lying to me forever,” Zach says.

I don’t say: “No, it only *feels* like forever because you’re, what, nineteen?”

I’m sick of being Mr Chips and Mrs Robinson.

The truth is, students are so similar to one another they might as well have been cut and pasted. Someone is always sweet and someone is always melodramatic and someone is always nerdy. I can always half–live in a student house with them (retreating to Linton’s spare room whenever I need to, because he’ll owe me forever). I can pick up enough — words, clothes, gestures — to blend in. And I can pick up the kind, nerdy boy who’s pleased to be picked, who believes I live with my strict parents who he can never meet. I’m a good girlfriend. And I’m fond of Zach. I’ve been fond of all my cover–boys. I have sympathy for him, for all of them, paying so much to get a leg up a broken ladder, with unemployment waiting for them at the top.

He’s looking at me with disgust, though, and my patience for that is limited.

“How can you do it?”

It’s only plagiarism. Two–thirds of his housemates have asked me to help them cheat. None of us are monsters. We’re symptoms of a sick system.

And then his face crinkles up, as much as those super–young faces can crinkle, and he says, “I *liked* you.”

He’s angry about our relationship, not my job. That’s fair enough, I was pretty despicable.

He says, “How *old* are you?”

Which they almost always ask, and which is the least of their fucking problems.

E. Saxey lectures at the University of London, and has had short fiction published in *Holdfast Magazine*, *Spacewitch Moonshots*, and anthologies *The Lowest Heaven* and *The Rite of Spring* (Jurassic London).

The Book of Apex: Volume 4 of Apex Magazine
edited by Lynne M. Thomas

The Book of Apex Volume 4 collects the original fiction from Hugo–winning editor Lynne M. Thomas's first fifteen issues at the helm of *Apex Magazine*, which included two Hugo Award nominations for the magazine.

Thirty–three science fiction, fantasy, and horror short stories grab readers by their emotional cores to stare deep into the source of our humanity and inhumanity. Well–known authors like Ken Liu, Genevieve Valentine, Catherynne M. Valente, Lavie Tidhar, and Alethea Kontis, along with newer voices, sketch surreal pasts, presents, and futures full of characters with familiar and outsized desires and fears.

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Apex Publications

Apex Interview with Caroline M. Yoachim

Maggie Slater

Since her writing career began in 2005, Nebula–nominated author Caroline M. Yoachim has written over a dozen short stories which have appeared in *Lightspeed*, *Interzone*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Shimmer*, and *Asimov's*, among many other top–notch markets. In 2006, Ms. Yoachim graduated from the Clarion West Writer's Workshop, and in 2011, her novelette "Stone Wall Truth" was nominated for a Nebula.

This issue of *Apex Magazine* includes Caroline M. Yoachim's heartbreaking flash fiction story "Paperclips and Memories and Things That Won't Be Missed." In this interview, Ms. Yoachim discusses with us the challenges of character development, her approach to flash fiction composition, Habit RPG, and junkyard pixies!

About "Paperclips and Memories and Things That Won't Be Missed"

APEX MAGAZINE: This is a lovely tale, very finely wrought with an intense emotional kick woven into its core. What was the initial spark that made you sit down to write this story?

CAROLINE M. YOACHIM: The initial spark for this story was a prompt and a deadline — I wrote it for a writing challenge I do every year called Weekend Warrior. The challenge is run through Codex, an online writing group I'm in, and participants write a flash fiction story every weekend for five straight weeks.

Vylar Kaftan writes the prompts for the challenge, and the one that sparked this story was to chose any three words from a list of twenty and write a story that included those words. I selected ghost, peanut, and invoice, but the list of words also got me thinking about odd collections of things. I liked the idea of ghosts collecting little things from the world of the living. At the time I wrote the story, my youngest daughter was about 3 months old, so the other bit of inspiration for the story was her fondness for warm bath water and white noise.

AM: Flash fiction can be a major challenge to write in a way that feels complete, but this story has a satisfying wholeness to it. How do you approach writing a piece of flash fiction versus other short fiction? What kinds of things do you take into consideration?

CMY: This is a tricky question for me. I've written more flash than any other length of story, and most of what I do is intuitive rather than planned. When I'm writing flash fiction I spend a lot of time on the opening paragraph. Since flash is so short, those first few sentences are crucial in getting the reader grounded in the story. The first paragraph (often the first sentence) introduces the speculative element for the story, and also sets the tone. The beginning has to set up the reader's expectations so that the ending will be satisfying — if I stick a humorous ending on a melancholy opening, the reader will feel cheated. Or if I introduce the speculative element too late, it feels like a twist or a cheat, instead of the premise for the story.

AM: What was the easiest part of writing "Paperclips and Memories and Things That Won't Be Missed"? What was the most challenging? Was there any part during the writing of this particular story where you surprised yourself?

CMY: The easiest part was coming up with all the random little things ghosts might collect. The most challenging thing was figuring out how to include (1) the rules of how collecting worked and (2) all the necessary backstory for both Margie and the narrator. To get everything in, the story definitely jumps around a bit, and coming up with smooth transitions from one paragraph to the next was often tricky.

The moment where I surprised myself was when I was writing the ending and realized that the baby could also collect things — which resulted in my favorite paragraph of the entire story.

About Writing in General:

AM: On your website, you mention that you started writing speculative fiction in 2005, and in 2006 you attended the Clarion West Writer's Workshop. What drew you to writing fiction and what was it in 2005 that sparked the determination to take your writing to the next level?

CMY: What I have on my website is true, but incomplete. I loved writing when I was a kid. I scribbled stories and poems into notebooks, many of which might still be boxed up in my basement somewhere. Then I went to college, and somehow in the chaos of living on my own and figuring out what my major was I stopped writing fiction. I don't think I wrote anything but essays and term papers for several years. In 2005, a friend of mine mentioned that he was writing a science fiction novel. This triggered an epiphany of sorts for me: novels are written by people like me. (I was in graduate school at the time, so obviously I recognized that novels were written by people. It just didn't occur to me that *I* could be one of those people.)

I wrote three or four chapters of a truly terrible novel, realized I was in way over my head, and sought out a writing group. I heard about Clarion West shortly after joining the writing group, and the concept of spending six weeks surrounded by a bunch of other writers and focusing on nothing but writing sounded amazing (and it was!).

AM: Do you have a set writing routine for yourself? Do you write every day, or in bursts? Work on multiple projects at a time, or focus on just one? Do you use any specific methods for keeping yourself on track on a given project?

CMY: I have tried, on several occasions, to write every day. I hear it works well for lots of other people, but my brain simply refuses to do it. I get a lot more done if I let myself work in bursts — a couple days with lots of writing followed by a day or two with none. (On the 'non–writing' days, I often do writing–related things like send out submissions, write critiques, answer interview questions, etc.)

I used to write one story at a time and not start another until the first was either finished or trunked, but lately I've shifted to working on several

projects at once. I'm not sure what prompted the change, or even whether it is a good thing. I used to force my way to the end of a story even if I felt like I was stuck — now if I get stuck I tend to jump to another project for a while and then come back.

I recently found a great tool for staying on track with my projects: Habit RPG (habitrpg.com/). It transforms your to do list into a game, and as you get things done you are rewarded with gold and eggs that hatch into pets.

Caroline's workspace, complete with toys and trees

AM: What is your editing philosophy? What works (and what doesn't) for you when approaching an initial draft?

CMY: My revisions process mostly consists of reading through a draft repeatedly, and fixing whatever things bother me the most on each pass. This is often incredibly inefficient, because even if I know that something about the middle of the story is broken, I will still do a full pass from the beginning all the way through to the end changing all kinds of little things

as I go through. Part of the reason that I do it this way is that I have a terrible memory, and I worry that if I jump around fixing things out of order the story will crumble into a bunch of pieces that no longer fit together.

AM: What is the best piece of advice you ever received about writing? What was the worst?

CMY: The best piece of advice is one that I've heard from many sources: don't self–reject. A story will never sell if you leave it sitting on your hard drive, so once it is "done" start sending it around. I can't think of a worse bit of advice off the top of my head — if I get a piece of advice that doesn't suit me, I tend not to remember it!

AM: There always seems to be one element of writing that comes more naturally to any given author, be it world–building, or character development, or dialogue, or pacing, etc. Is there any element of writing that you find comes easily to you? Is there any element that you find particularly challenging?

CMY: I'm not sure there's any one element that always comes easily for me. I tend to start from a core idea (e.g., ghosts that collect or time that flows backwards or an enchanted carnival made entirely of sugar), and whatever elements tie in closest to the core idea of the story tend to come easiest for me. Character development nearly always gives me trouble, and I have a tendency to avoid dialog as much as possible because I have a hard time making it sound realistic.

AM: You're also a professional photographer. How did you become involved in photography, and what about that visual art form inspires you? Do you have a favorite picture?

CMY: With two young kids, I haven't had the time to keep up with photography and writing, so photography is more of a hobby than a profession for me these days. That said, I still love taking pictures, and I hope to get back to doing more photography eventually.

I love the way photography can capture a moment in time. A picture can evoke emotion or trigger memories or inspire an idea (I sometimes use interesting photos as prompts for stories). But the thing that really made photography work for me was the transition to digital cameras. I love the freedom of being able to take hundreds of pictures and discarding all but the best three. It lets me, as a photographer, really experiment with the images in a way that I'd be reluctant to do if taking too many shots meant wasting film. I often wish that there was a writing equivalent of digital photography, where I could write a hundred stories and only submit the best few, but given how long it takes me to finish a story, I don't think that would be a good strategy.

AM: Being an author often goes hand in hand with being a voracious reader. What are you currently reading, fiction or non–fiction? Any recommendations?

CMY: I've been reading a lot of YA and MG lately, to get into the right mindset for revising a middle grade novel I'm working on. I'm in the middle of reading Nalo Hopkinson's *Sister Mine* at the moment — I picked it up because I saw it on the list of nominees for the Andre Norton Award this year. I'm not entirely sure I'd classify it as YA (although I can certainly see how it got there), but I'm enjoying the book. A couple other recent reads that come to mind are Rebecca Stead's *When You Reach Me* and Ally Condie's *Matched*.

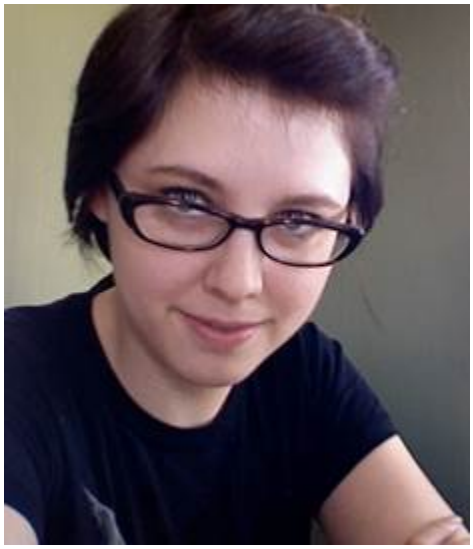
AM: What are you working on now, writing–wise (if you can say), and what can we look forward to seeing from you in the coming months?

CMY: I'm currently working on revisions for a middle grade novel with the working title *Junk Craft Magic*. It tells the story of an eleven–year–old mixed–race girl who saves a bunch of junkyard pixies from a wall of hazardous waste. I'm also writing an assortment of short stories, including a couple of collaborations with Tina Connolly.

Toasted Cake has podcast several of Caroline's stories

In the upcoming months, I have stories coming out in *Lightspeed*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. I update my website periodically as stories come out, so for a complete listing of recent publications, go to: carolineyoachim.com

AM: Thank you so much, Ms. Yoachim, for sharing "Paperclips and Memories and Things That Won't Be Missed" with us here at *Apex Magazine*, and for giving us this behind–the–scenes glimpse of your writing!



Maggie Slater writes in Portland, where she lives with her husband and two old, cranky cats. She has seen her work published in a variety of venues, such as *The Storyteller Magazine*, *Fantastical Visions IV*, and the anthology *Dark Futures: Tales of Dystopian SF*, from Dark Quest Books. She currently moonlights as an assistant editor for Apex Publications. For more information about her and her current writing projects, visit her blog at maggiedot.wordpress.com.

Finding the Next Lost: What Is an "Operational Theme" and Why Don't I Have One?

Javier Grillo–Marxuach

One of the many perks afforded a journeyman writer/producer in television is receiving scripts for network television pilots as they are being made. It's like the best possible version of the *TV Guide* Fall Preview Issue I used to compulsively reread under the covers with a flashlight as a kid. Except that now I have the added thrill: if my agents do their job, if I am good in the interview, if a million other moving parts click in the correct order, I help the people who created these shows realize their vision.

This inside window into the totality of network development puts us journeyman television writers and producers in an interesting position to spot and track trends as they develop, fade, or mature. One trend that persists — almost a decade after its inception — is every broadcaster's ongoing quest to put on the air the next great serialized high–concept sci–fi show: to find the next *Lost*.

Of course, it seldom works.

My own modest contribution to the evolution of *Lost* — and having worked on a number of shows with similar goals in the years since — provides something of a vantage point from which to judge the success — and failure — of these attempts. More often than not, it boils down to the presence or absence of a crucial element I call "the operational theme."

In high school and college, most of us could pick a lofty word or idea and designate it the "theme" of a play or novel: "power," "alienation," "banality of evil," or (my personal favorite) "the shallowness of modern life." We could then write a coffee–and–Red–Bull–fueled paper, using choice quotes from the partially–skimmed bit of required reading, and have a pretty good shot at not winding up ashamed to show the report card to our parents in the morning. Sadly, for the professional television writers — even the really astute ones — this is neither enough to create something that will connect with an audience — nor will it survive the production goal of many seasons and possible syndication.

Television is a populist medium with little patience for intellectual phumphering. Hour–long drama is — first and foremost — about creating

characters driven by internal forces that, melded to the right situation, can fuel every action, every line, every scene, and every plot for hundreds of successful episodes. This is the operational theme: a situational vector that cleanly delineates the potential variations of action in service of the protagonist's consistent emotional need. This is *crucial* to the success of a television pilot. It is crucial to the successful episodes to come. It is, indeed, what television pilots should see as the first order of business to establish. And yet, it is most often the part that's missing — especially from the sci–fi shows.

In a procedural series, the operational theme of the protagonist is usually pretty cut–and–dry. He or she is — sometimes quite literally — dedicated to bringing about law and order. The reason cops, doctors, and lawyers rule — and will probably always rule — the airwaves in some form or another is that their operational theme is baked into their personality. It is a function of their job — the eradication of suffering and injustice at any cost — and is usually fused with personal obsession brought about by past trauma.

If television is to be believed, the most dangerous thing to be in the world is the spouse of a detective. Most of them wind up dead at the hands of some psychopath who remains uncatchable for the span of episodes it takes to score a lucrative syndication deal for the series. Television thrives on workaholic protagonists who sacrifice — or have sacrificed for them — their personal relationships in favor of protecting people like us — the viewer!

As television has evolved to include more serialized, heavily "mythologized" drama — even in the stock genres of crime, medicine, and the law — the operational theme of the protagonist must remain front and center for the series to succeed. In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White's operational theme — "to save everything I love I must become something everyone hates" — creates an endless supply of drama. Every situation Walter enters requires him to tell, develop, and sustain a lie.

This brilliant operational theme requires every single scene in the show to be front–loaded with deception and subterfuge. It's a recipe for perfect ongoing drama that allowed the show to slowly string out and develop its more academic theme: the seduction of a good man by the infinite charms of wealth, power, and his descent into darkness. But make no mistake, academic is the right word for those themes. It was the initial simplicity of

Walter White's *operational* theme that consistently opened dramatic avenues episode after episode.

It doesn't end with Walter White. The current "golden era" of television is littered with very easily identifiable operational themes that burden their protagonists. Tony Soprano wants to remain a sadistic mobster even though his unconscious musters every weapon at its disposal to get him to turn away from his horrific life. Don Draper continually tries to keep up the idealized appearance of the successful mid–century man in the grey flannel suit as his inner demons plague him with the truth that his entire life is a lie. Doctor House wants to be left in peace to be a belligerent drug addict but is forced to put his basic instincts aside and perform the job of genius diagnostician.

Outside of TV, my favorite example of the perfect fusion of situation and character into operational theme is the film *Die Hard*. The entire narrative is an extended metaphor for marital therapy: a husband trying to earn back his estranged wife. The terrorists are the physical manifestation of the emotional barriers that keep John McClane from familial bliss. As with any person in couples counseling, McClane systematically loses his metaphorical armor as he fights to the point of exhaustion. He ends up shoeless and bloody, blubbering to his "therapist" about his love for his wife — bleeding both thematically and practically.

The bathroom confession in *Die Hard* could have just easily been an episode of HBO's *In Treatment*: a man denuded through adversity of all the trappings of macho pride, forced to confront his raw emotional wounds.

It seems obvious, and, frankly, inevitable — in the way that a Mark Rothko painting, or an Arne Jacobsen chair, appear inevitable — that simple operational themes are the key to serialized success. And yet, by and large, most attempts at serialized, mythologized sci–fi fail to pull off this trick. Think of all the genre series that have attempted to capitalize on the serialized mystery/heavy–mythology vogue triggered by *Lost*: *Flash Forward*, *Kingdom Hospital*, *Surface*, *The Event*, *Invasion*, *V*, *Threshold*, *Awake*, *Journeyman*, *Dollhouse*, *Persons Unknown*, *Terra Nova*, the American remake of *Life on Mars* — the list goes on and on.

Most of the sci–fi shows we now regard as classics — and the majority that are currently successful and truly long–running, like *Supernatural* —

are not *Lost* clones. Rather, they are straightforward procedural franchises with simple operational themes.

The brothers Winchester, Nick Burkhardt in *Grimm*, Mulder and Scully in *The X–Files* — even *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* — are all basically cops: rolling into a new case week after week, interrogating suspects, finding lore that matches the methodology of the villains, confronting evildoers, serving justice, and moving on to the next week's transgressor. In the best of these series, an overarching theme buttresses the set–up: Mulder and Scully's dynamic was defined by opposing viewpoints which fueled every scene. In addition to being thrust into stories by their occupation every week, they always had a basic ideological conflict that spoke to their character.

Even the beloved crew of the Starship Enterprise are hyper–competent trouble–shooters placed into stories weekly by dint of external mission as opposed to internal need. In the best *Star Trek* series, this necessity was supported by an interesting character dynamic: Captain Kirk, Spock, and McCoy are a three–man representation of the ego, superego, and id. The drama of the series lied in watching these three archetypes integrate into a coherent solution to the planet–of–the–week's problem: McCoy would shout, "dammit, man, we gotta do something!" Spock would reply that "to do something would be illogical." Kirk would eventually say "I have a plan."

Compare that infinitely fruitful character interaction with the first two seasons of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* — a long and tedious stew of underdeveloped, under–thought characters kept afloat by the exigencies of a procedural franchise. On *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s first two years there was always a potentially interesting issue with the planet–of–the–week. But it took almost two years for the characters to become anywhere as interesting as the show's premise. (It's a miracle of the extant love of *Star Trek* in the core audience, or the innate intrigue of the show's premise, or the economics of first–run syndication in the late eighties — or maybe some combination of the three — that the show survived long enough for its characters to find their way into being fully–realized people who could carry a story like "The Inner Light," "Chains of Command," or "Tapestry.")

Had the writers merely dropped the original characters of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* on a desert island — a place with no innate sense of

mission — the series would have surely collapsed.

Lost succeeded in telling a longitudinal story because it managed to create a central operational theme for every single one of the characters in its voluminous ensemble. In the earliest days of the creation of the series, the creative team behind *Lost* — co–creators Damon Lindelof and J.J. Abrams, with the assistance of Paul Dini, Christian Taylor, Jennifer Johnson, and myself — came upon the idea of using flashbacks to develop the operational themes for each character. The flashbacks to the crash of Oceanic 815 first presented in the pilot transformed into full–blown plots extending through the course of the series. The island stories were presented in direct contrast to who the characters were in their former everyday lives. *Every action in the island — present became an attempt to compensate for shortcomings in the past's real world.*

The operating theme of *Lost* is simple and applies to every character: who do you say you are when you can reinvent yourself with impunity? Every member of the *Lost* ensemble was living a lie on the island. These lies dictated their behavior and led them to try — either successfully or unsuccessfully — to remake themselves into their most desired version of themselves.

Jack strove to lead in spite of a life of personal failure and the scorn of an unloving father. Kate yearned to prove herself a good person in spite of being a wanted criminal. Michael tried to be an able parent after being absent from his son's entire life. Charlie struggled to be a caretaker to Claire and her unborn child while concealing his drug addiction. John Locke — mysteriously healed of his paralysis by the island — was hell–bent on proving himself a man of action and principle after a lifetime of meek submission. Sun pretended to be a dutiful Korean wife, concealing even her fluency in the English from the brutal husband — whose brutality itself was a smokescreen to conceal a deep yearning for his own broken dreams — whom she was preparing to escape. The list goes on. What's important is that every character had the *same* operational theme. The synthesis of personal desire for reinvention in contrast to the reality of each character's previous life propelled one story after another for the course of *Lost*'s first two seasons: forty–eight hours of television that cemented the show's place in the popular culture.

The operational theme of *Lost* — obvious as it seems in retrospect — did not become clear to the creative team until after the pilot had been

shot and we were tasked with figuring out *how* exactly the series would work in episode after episode. We were very close to falling prey to the fallacy that makes for the downfall of most of the proposed serialized sci–fi pilots that come down the pike: we were almost — almost — seduced by a shiny concept — the mysteries of the island, from the smoke monster to the presence of ghosts from the past in the present. We almost focused on the mystery instead of the operational theme of the characters.

To this day, I thank god we had the epiphany early.

By dealing with the unknown, beguiling, and generally spectacular (aliens! robots! vampires! alien robot vampires!), sci–fi as a genre has the sneaky ability to fool otherwise extremely capable writers into believing that a nifty concept with a lot of unanswered questions is enough to carry a television series. It isn't.

To have something spectacular take place — the arrival of aliens, a space/time conflagration that causes everyone to see a few minutes of their future, a plane crash in a mysterious island — and then spend twenty–two episodes showing how the characters figure out merely what happened, how, and whether it can be fixed, is not only the biggest failure of the imagination possible in sci–fi drama, it is also an insult to the genre. It assumes that sci–fi is somehow "easier" than a deeply character–driven kitchen–sink narrative (like *Mad Men*) that requires the protagonist to have a rich inner life in order to motivate conflict.

The island on *Lost* served the same purpose as the ad agency on *Mad Men*: it was a space where the protagonist sought to invent a new life in spite of all evidence to the impossibility of that endeavor. The conspiracy in *Orphan Black* is nothing more or less than a perfect physicalization of a young woman's struggle to define her own identity: one which just so happens to cause her to come into conflict and allegiance with numerous clones of herself, all of them living vastly different lives with remarkably different outcomes.

Many big and shiny ideas can tap dance around a lack of an operational theme for a while — the length of a pilot, maybe even a season of decompressed cable–style narrative. But no amount of spectacle can obscure the truth that a protagonist or ensemble with a stark, robust, and recognizable operational theme is the source of all televisual drama.

Ironically, sci–fi, the genre that most often suffers from underdeveloped characters on TV probably demands more *character* from its characters

than any other genre. Why? Because it is, at the core, a metaphorical exercise. Sci–fi poses a question that extends beyond the easily understandable stakes of the cop, doctor, or lawyer. How are the aliens, robots, mysterious islands, viral outbreaks, and vampires an external manifestation of your main character's self–concept?

If you are writing a genre pilot and your premise can't answer that question — while placing your protagonist in a place where the pursuit of their most prescient emotional issue is in consistent, discernible, and direct opposition of those aliens, robots, islands, viral outbreaks, and vampires — then, like any other writer in any other genre, you have to dig deeper. Because the privilege of having a scholar find and explain your lofty thematic concern like "power," "alienation," or (still my personal favorite,) "the shallowness of modern life" doesn't come right away. Scholars and bloggers don't proclaim the deep meaningful metaphors of your creation you have done the hard spade–and–trowel labor of putting an interesting main character on the screen. You must first put your characters in the one, singular (and preferably, for my money, science–fictional!) situation that *most* challenges their true self. That's your operational theme: challenge your character's innermost identity, do it week after week, then have your agent call my agent.

Photo by: Stephen Lemieux/SRLemieuxPhoto

Though best known as one of the Emmy Award–winning producers of *Lost*, Javier Grillo–Marxuach is a prolific writer of TV shows, movies, and comic books. His credits include *seaQuest*, *The Pretender*, *Charmed*, *Boomtown*, *The Chronicle*, *Jake 2.0*, *Medium*, and SyFy's *Helix*. Grillo–Marxuach is also creator of *The Middleman* graphic novels and ABC Family TV show, and co–hosts the *Children of Tendu* podcast, in which he dispenses advice on breaking into and staying in the TV business with fellow writer/producer Jose Molina.

Apex Interview with Anneliese Juergensen

Loraine Sammy

APEX MAGAZINE: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself as an illustrator?

ANNELIESE JUERGENSEN: I grew up in the suburbs of Connecticut, where I drew pictures on every sheet of paper and homework I could find. I went to Muhlenberg College in Allentown, PA, and earned a B.A. in Studio Art with a minor in English, and then went to the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and finished my post–baccalaureate degree in Illustration. I love working in watercolor, ink, digital, and acrylic. You can find more of my work at my website, as well as my Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook!

AM: Your piece "Stars" has a very dreamlike, magical quality about it. What was your inspiration behind this artwork? Is there a story to the little girl featured in the image?

AJ: This piece was actually a kind of an experiment! I scanned a drawing I liked from my little sketchbook and played around with color and lighting digitally to create a dreamy feel. The little girl doesn't have a specific story right now, but maybe she will in the future! When I make work for myself, I love making images that could be an illustration from part of a story. It's often a lot of fun finding out what other people, especially kids, think what that story may be. I showed this to a group of kids when I was a visiting artist at an after–school art program in New York City called Free Arts NYC last year. The kids came up with a lot of amazing ideas about this little girl! I've noticed that most of the adults try to rotate the image so the girl is right–side–up. Kids never really seem to have a problem with her being upside–down!

AM: Looking through your website I saw you had two sections — one for art geared to children and the other for art geared to ‘big people’. What sorts of thought processes go into creating art for a younger audience versus an older one?

AJ: It’s mostly the subject matter. The work I create for younger audiences mainly focuses on the experiences of being a child, while the work I make for adults deal with subject matter that many children might be less interested in. As far as style and approach, though, there’s a lot of overlap. Sometimes I come across people that believe that children’s illustration and literature is just a diluted version of grown–up literature and entertainment, but I don’t believe that. Children deserve the best, and books with even the simplest artistic styles and words have tons of thought behind them. Likewise, a little while ago, when I was asked to make illustrations for a series of informational posters for a medical group, my client and I decided to use a soft and whimsical approach. Adults, especially in stressful situations, also long for something comforting!

AM: One of your other illustrations — the old mermaid and her whale friend — is extremely popular on Tumblr! I see it all the time on my tumblr dash, and I love the sentiment behind it. How did you come up with the idea?

AJ: Thanks! The picture was inspired by a conversation my friend and I had, where we wondered what an old mermaid would look like. Whales fascinate me, I devoured books about them as a girl and still love learning about them and going on whale watches whenever I can. The whale in the drawing is a California Gray Whale, a species that is known for being very curious and friendly, sometimes even going right up to small boats to be petted by people! I thought that such a creature would make a great best friend for a mermaid!

I'm still very excited to see this picture get so much attention on Tumblr! I love reading the tags and comments and seeing how people are reacting to it and thinking about it. I've always wanted to connect with people through

my art, and seeing people enjoy it so much is wonderful and a little overwhelming, in a good way!

I am now writing and illustrating a picture book based on this drawing! I spent the last few months working on and editing a book dummy, and workshopping it with my SCBWI (Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators) groups. I'm currently in the process of finding an editor or agent for it!

AM: You have a range of people and subject matter in your art that I think engages and speaks to many different communities. What sorts of artistic and conceptual goals do you set for yourself when you illustrate professionally?

AJ: I want my work, even when dealing with fantasy settings or subject matter, to reflect the world around me and be inclusive and welcoming to a variety of different people. I've been reading a lot about the lack of diversity in the media, and even as a kid I longed for more stories featuring interesting girls. I want to do right by my audience, and also grow as an illustrator by exploring different characters who don't all look the same!

When working on an illustration, I try to find the right feel of the piece and the emotion of the character. I try to make my artwork so the viewer will want to connect with the characters in it.

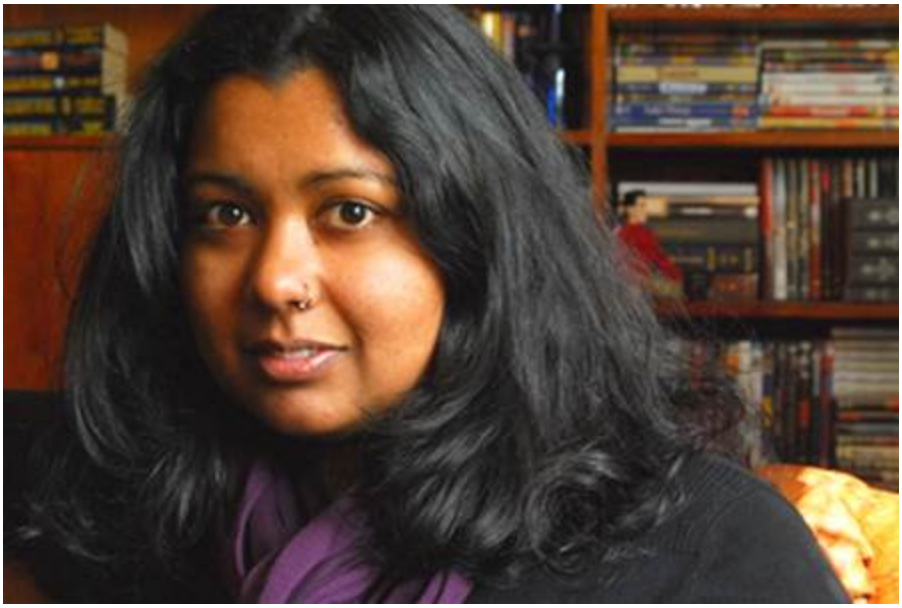
AM: What do you love about creating artwork in the genres of fantasy and science fiction? What do you love about creating art for children to enjoy?

AJ: I love being able to tell stories within my work, and how science fiction and fantasy are unlimited in what you can tell. There is so much possibility: you can create work about what you may find in the future in the farthest part of space, or what divine, tiny thing is hiding right now in the corner of the room. Sometimes it's like being able to step away for a little bit from day–to–day life, so that you can come back refreshed and understanding your world a little better.

I love making art for children because it gives me a chance to play like a child. Kids use play and imagination not just for fun, it's a tool to help them figure out their surroundings and the other people and creatures that inhabit the world with them. I love making art that's not just for myself, but invites people to come along and play with me.

AM: Anneliese, thank you once again for letting us feature your art, and good luck in all of your future artistic ventures!

AJ: Thank you for having me for this interview!



Loraine Sammy's involvement in the online creative world has taken her across the United States, attending conventions and conferences for multiple fandoms and cultural media events. As co–founder of racebending.com, she has done various presentations and panels on equal representation in modern entertainment, encouraging active participation from media consumers. However, her one true passion is rooted in the world of art and artists. As a professional and freelance illustrator, Loraine is endlessly fascinated by the wide impact that visual creativity has on our society, and vice versa. Ultimately, it is artistic diversity that keeps Loraine enthralled by the wonder of our collective human imagination.

She currently lives in Vancouver, BC — but this particular Canadian is neither mild nor apologetic, eh. Her website: lorainesammy.com.

Microbe

Joan Slonczewski

“The rat didn’t die.” Andra walked around the holostage. Before her, projected down from the geodesic dome, shone the planet’s image: Iota Pavonis Three, the first new world approved for settlement in over four centuries. As Andra walked around, the swirl of a mysterious continent peered out through a swathe of cloud. She stopped, leaning forward on her elbows to watch. What name of its own would the Free Fold Federation ultimately bestow on IP3, Andra wondered; such a lovely, terrifying world.

“Not the last time, the rat didn’t.” The eyespeaker was perched on her shoulder. It belonged to Skyhook, the sentient shuttle craft that would soon carry Andra from the study station down to land on the new world. A reasonable arrangement: The shuttle craft would carry the human xenobiologist through space for her field work, then she would carry his eye on the planet surface, as she did inside the station. “The rat only died down there the first eight times.”

“Until we got its ‘skin’ right.” The “skin” was a suit of nanoplast, containing billions of microscopic computers, designed to filter out all the local toxins — arsenic, lanthanides, bizarre pseudoalkaloids. All were found in local flora and fauna; inhaling them would kill a human within hours. In the old days, planets had been terraformed for human life, like Andra’s own home world Valedon. Today they would call that ecocide. Instead, millions of humans would be lifeshaped to live here on planet IP3, farming and building — the thought of it made her blood race.

“We got the skin right for the rat,” Skyhook’s eyespeaker pointed out. “But you’re not exactly a rat.”

From across the holostage, an amorphous blob of nanoplast raised a pseudopod. “Not *exactly* a rat,” came a voice from the nanoplast. It was the voice of Pelt, the skinsuit that would protect Andra on the alien planet surface. “Not exactly a rat — just about nine–tenths, I’d say. Your cell physiology is practically the same as a rat; why, you could even take organ grafts. Only a few developmental genes make the difference.”

Andra smiled. “Thank the Spirit for a few genes. Life would be so much less interesting.”

Pelt’s pseudopod wiggled. “The rat lived, and so will you. But our nanoservos completely jammed.” The microscopic nanoservos had

swarmed into sample life forms from IP3 to test their chemical structure. But for some reason they could barely begin to send back data before they broke down. “Nobody cares about them.”

“Of course we care,” Andra said quickly. Pelt never let anyone value human life above that of sentient machines. “That’s why we cut short the analysis, until we can bring samples back to the station. That’s why we’re sending *me*.”

“Us,” he corrected.

“All right, enough already,” said Skyhook. “Why don’t we review our data one last time?”

“Very well.” A third sentient voice boomed out of the hexagonal panel in the dome directly overhead. It was the explorer station herself, Quantum. Quantum was considered female, the others male; Andra could never tell why, although sentients would laugh at any human who could not tell the difference. “Here are some microbial cells extracted from the soil by the last probe,” said Quantum.

The planet’s image dissolved. In its place appeared the highly magnified shapes of the microbes. The cells were round and somewhat flattened, rather like red blood cells. But if one looked closer, one could see that each flattened cell was actually pinched in straight through like a bagel.

“The toroid cell shape has never been observed on other planets,” said Quantum. “Otherwise, the cell’s structure is simple. No nuclear membranes surround the chromosomes; so, these cells are like bacteria, *prokaryotes*.”

Skyhook said, “The chromosome might be circular, too, as in bacteria.”

“Who knows?” said Pelt. “On Urulan, all the chromosomes are branched. It took us decades to do genetics there.”

“We just don’t know yet,” said Quantum. “All we know is, the cells contain DNA.”

“The usual double helix?” asked Skyhook. The double helix is a ladder of DNA nucleotide pairs, always adenine with thymine or guanine with cytosine, for the four different “letters” of the DNA code. When a cell divides to make two cells, the entire helix unzips, then fills in a complementary strand for each daughter cell.

“The nanoservos failed before they could tell for sure. But it does have all four nucleotides.”

Andra watched the magnified microbes as their images grew, their ring shapes filling out like bagel dough rising. “I’ll bet their chromosomes run right around the hole.”

At her shoulder Skyhook’s eyespeaker laughed. “That would be a neat trick.”

Quantum added, “We identified fifteen amino acids in its proteins, including the usual six.” All living things have evolved to use six amino acids in common, the ones that form during the birth of planets. “But three of the others are toxic —”

“Look,” exclaimed Andra. “The cell is starting to divide.” One of the bulging toroids had begun to pucker in, all along its circumference. The puckered line deepened into a furrow all the way around the cell. Along the inside of the “hole,” a second furrow deepened, eventually to meet the furrow from the outer rim.

“So that’s how the cell divides,” said Skyhook. “Not by pinching in across the hole; instead it slices through.”

“The better to toast it.”

At that Pelt’s pseudopod made a rude gesture. “Pinching the hole in wouldn’t make sense, if your chromosome encircles the hole; you’d pinch off half of it.”

Andra squinted and leaned forward on her elbows. “I say — that cell has *three* division furrows.”

“The daughter cells are dividing again already?” Skyhook suggested.

“No, it’s a third furrow in the same generation. All three furrows are meeting up in the middle.”

“That’s right,” boomed Quantum’s voice. “These cells divide in three, not two,” she explained. “Three daughter cells in each generation.”

Sure enough, the three daughter cells appeared, filling themselves out as they separated. Other cells too had puckered in by now, at various stages of division, and all made their daughters in triplets. “How would they divide their chromosomes to make three?” Andra wondered. “They must copy each DNA helix twice before dividing. Why would that have evolved?”

“Never mind the DNA,” said Pelt. “It’s those toxic amino acids you should worry about.”

“Not with you protecting me. The rat survived.”

Quantum said, “We’ve discussed every relevant point. We’ve established, based on all available data, that Andra’s chance of survival

approaches one hundred percent."

"Uncertainties remain," Skyhook cautioned.

Andra stood back and spread her hands. "Of course we need more data — that's why we're going down."

"All right," said Skyhook. "Let's go."

"I'm ready." Pelt's pseudopod dissolved, and the nanoplast formed a perfect hemisphere.

Andra unhooked Skyhook's eyespeaker from her shoulder. Then she walked back around the holostage to lift the hemisphere of Pelt onto her head. Pelt's nanoplast began to melt slowly down over her black curls, leaving a thin transparent film of nanoprocessors covering her hair, her dark skin, and her black eyes. It formed a special breather over her nose and mouth. Everywhere the nanoplast would filter the air that reached her skin, keeping planetary dust out while letting oxygen through. The film covered the necklace of pink andradites around her neck, spreading down her shirt and trousers. She lifted each foot in turn to allow the complete enclosure. Now she would be safe from any chemical hazard she might encounter.

§

In Skyhook's viewport, the surface of planet IP3 expanded and rose to meet them. Numerous tests had established its physical parameters as habitable — gravity of nine–tenths g, temperatures not too extreme, oxygen sufficient and carbon dioxide low enough, water plentiful. The ozone layer could have been denser, but human colonists would have their eyes and skin lifeshaped for extra enzymes to keep their retina and chromosomes repaired.

At a distance the planet did not look remarkably different from Andra's home world. A brilliant expanse of ocean met a mottled brown shore, rotating slowly down beneath the craft. Beyond, in the upper latitudes, rolled the blue–brown interior of a continent, broken only by a circle of mountains.

As Skyhook fell swiftly toward the land, curious patterns emerged. Long dark bands ran in parallel, in gently winding rows like a string picture. The lines were bands of blue vegetation; the probe had sent back footage of them, wide arching structures tall as trees. Each band alternated with a

band of yellow, which gave way to the next band of blue. Over and over the same pattern repeated, ceasing only at the mountains.

“I’ve never seen patterns like that on uncolonized worlds,” Andra mused.

“They do look like garden rows,” Skyhook admitted. “Perhaps the native farmers will come out to greet us.”

If there were intelligent life forms, they had yet to invent radio. A year of monitoring the planet at every conceivable frequency had yielded nothing, not so much as a calculation of pi.

Skyhook landed gently in a field of dense vegetation. The wall of the cabin opened, the door pulling out into an arch of nanoplast. A shaft of brilliant light entered.

“All systems check,” crackled Quantum’s voice on the radio in her ear. “Go ahead.”

Andra gathered her field equipment and set Skyhook’s eye upon her shoulder again. Then she stepped outside.

The field was a riot of golden ringlets, like wedding bands strewn out. Her gaze followed the cascade of gold down to the edge of the field, where taller dark trunks arose in shallow curves, arching overhead. From the taller growth came a keening sound, perhaps some living thing singing, or perhaps the wind vibrating somehow through its foliage. “It’s beautiful,” she exclaimed at last.

Beneath the golden ringlets grew dense blue–brown vegetation, reaching to Andra’s waist. She bent closer for a look. “These look like plants, ‘phycoids.’ The ringlets might be flowers.”

“They could just as well be snakes ready to snap,” warned Skyhook. “Watch your step.”

She looked back at the shuttlecraft, planted in the field like a four–legged insect. Then she lifted her leg through the foliage, Pelt’s nanoplastic “skin” flexing easily. Immediately her foot snagged. She tried to pull out some of the growth, but found it surprisingly tough and had to cut it with a knife. “The leaves and stems are all looped,” she observed in surprise. “All looped, just like the ‘flowers;’ I’ll never get through this stuff.”

Pelt said, “They *are* phycoid. I detect products of photosynthesis.”

“They could be carnivorous plants,” Skyhook insisted.

Andra collected some more cuttings into her backpack. “I wish I could smell them,” she said wistfully. Pelt’s skin filtered out all volatile organics. She aimed her laser pen to dig one out by the roots. The phycoid came up, but nearby stems sparked and smoldered.

“Watch out!” squeaked the eyespeaker.

She winced. “Don’t deafen me; I’ll put it out.” She stamped the spot with her boots and sprinkled some water from her drinking jet. “This planet’s a fire trap.” The phycoid roots, she noted, were long twisted loops, tightly pressed together, but loops nonetheless. All the living structures seemed to be bagels squashed and stretched.

“Great Spirit, we’ve got company,” Skyhook exclaimed.

Andra looked up. She blinked her eyes. A herd of brown–striped truck tires were rolling slowly across the field. To get a closer look, she pressed through the phycoids, stopping every so often to extricate her feet from the looped foliage. She made about ten meters progress before stopping to catch her breath.

“No need to get too close,” Skyhook reminded her. His eye had telephoto.

“Yes, but I might pick up droppings, or some fallen hair or scales.”

Some of the rolling “tires” were heading toward her. Each one had several round cranberry–colored spots set in its “tread.” The “tread” was composed of suckers that stretched and extended to push in back, or pull in front. “They must be animal–like, ‘zoöids,’ ” suggested Andra. “Those red things — could they be eyes?” She counted them, two, three, four in all, before the first came up again. Those eyes must be tough, not to mind getting squashed down.

“If these creatures are zoöids,” Pelt wanted to know, “how do they feed?”

Skyhook said, “Their suckers ingest the phycoids.”

Andra stopped again to pull out her foot. “They sure know how to travel,” she wryly observed. “No wonder they never evolved legs.” One four–eyed zoöid got excited, and took off with remarkable speed; then it suddenly reversed, heading backwards just as fast. These zoöids had no “backwards” or “forwards,” she thought.

Quantum radioed again. “Andra, how are you holding up? Is your breathing okay?”

She took a deep breath. “I think so.” Most of the rats had died from inhaling toxic dust. She resumed her attempt to make headway through the phycoids, and searched the ground for anything that looked like droppings. Overhead, she heard a strange whirring sound. A flock of little things were flying, their movements too fast for her to make out.

“Their wings are turning full around, like propellers,” Skyhook exclaimed in amazement. “Why, all these creatures are built of wheels, one way or another.”

“Sh,” said Andra. “A zoöid is coming up close.”

The creature rolled slowly over the phycoids, squashing the golden ringlets beneath it. Andra took a closer look. “There’s a smaller ring structure, just sitting inside the bagel hole. I’ll bet it’s a baby zoöid.” The clinging little one rolled over and over inside as its parent traveled. The parent did not seem to notice Andra at all; neither her shape nor her smell would resemble a native predator, she guessed.

The radio crackled again. “We must attempt contact,” Quantum reminded her. Any zoöid might be intelligent.

Andra held out her communicator, a box that sent out flashing lights and sound bursts in various mathematical patterns, strings of primes and various representations of pi and other constants. It even emitted puffs of volatile chemicals, to alert any chemosensing creature with a hint of intelligence. Not that she expected much; their probes had broadcast such information over the past year.

Then she saw it: A giant zoöid was approaching, five times taller than the others and perhaps a hundred times their weight. As it barreled along, picking up speed, the small striped ones took off, zigzagging crazily before it. The ground rumbled beneath her feet.

“Get back to my cabin!” urged Skyhook. “We’ll all get run over.”

“Wait,” said Pelt. “Do you think it heard us? What if it wants to talk?”

“I don’t think so,” said Andra, prudently backing off. “I think the smaller zoöids attracted it, not us.”

A small zoöid went down under the giant one, then another. That seemed to be the giant’s strategy, to run down as many little ones as it could. At last it slowed and turned back, coming to rest upon one of the squashed carcasses.

“It’s extending its suckers to feed,” observed Skyhook. “Let’s get back before it gets hungry again.”

“I think that will be a while,” said Andra. “It’s got several prey to feed on.” The rest of the smaller zoöids seemed to have calmed down, as if they knew the predator was satisfied and would not attack again soon. Definitely a herd mentality; no sign of higher intelligence here.

Andra resumed collecting phycoids and soil samples, recording the location of each. Deeper into the field, she saw something thrashing about in the phycoids. She made her way toward it through the tangle of looped foliage.

“It’s a baby zoöid,” she exclaimed. The poor little bagel must have fallen out when its parent ran off. Or perhaps the parent had expelled it, as a mother kangaroo sometimes did. At any rate, there it was, squirming and stretching its little suckers ineffectually, only tangling itself in the phycoids.

“Watch out; it might bite,” said Skyhook.

“Nonsense. I have to collect it.” Andra stuffed her hands into a pair of gloves, then approached warily. With one hand she held out an open collecting bag; with the other, she grabbed the little zoöid. It hung limply, twisting a bit.

Suddenly it squirted something. An orange spray landed on the phycoids, some of it reaching her leg. Andra frowned. She plunged the creature into her bag, which sealed itself tight. “Sorry about that, Pelt.”

“You’re the one who would have been sorry,” Pelt replied. “That stuff is caustic, as strong as lye. No problem for me, but your skin would not have liked it.”

“Thanks a lot. I guess we should head back now; I’ve got more than I can hold.”

She turned back toward Skyhook, some hundred meters off, his spidery landing gear splayed out into the phycoids. Methodically she made her way back, with more difficulty now that she had so much to carry. She was sweating now, but Pelt handled it beautifully, keeping her skin cool and refreshed. The distant forest of tall blue phycoids sang in her ears. The Singing Planet, they should call it, she thought.

“Andra… something’s not right,” Pelt said suddenly.

“What is it?” She was having more trouble plowing through the foliage; her legs were getting stiff.

“Something that baby zoöid sprayed is blocking my nanoprocessors. Not the chemicals; I can screen out anything. I’m not sure what it is.”

“What else could it be?”

Skyhook said, “Just get back to my cabin. We’ll wash you down.”

“I’m trying,” said Andra, breathing hard. “My legs are so stiff.” The shuttle craft stood hopefully ahead of her. Only about ten meters to go, she thought.

“It’s not your legs,” Pelt’s voice said dully. “It’s my nanoplast. I’m losing control over the lower part, where the spray hit. I can’t flex at your joints any more.”

Her scalp went cold, then hot again. “What about your air filter?”

“So far it’s okay. The disruption has not reached your face yet.”

“Just get back here,” Skyhook urged again. “You’re almost here.” Obligingly the doorway appeared on the craft’s surface, molding itself open in a rim of nanoplast.

“I’m trying, but my legs just won’t bend.” She pushed as hard as she could.

“Drop your backpack,” Skyhook added.

“I won’t give up my samples. How else will we learn what’s going on here?” She fell onto her stomach and tried to drag herself through.

“It’s microbes,” Pelt exclaimed suddenly. “Some kind of microbes — they’re cross–linking my processors.”

“What? How?” she demanded. “Microbes infecting nanoplast — I’ve never heard of it.”

“They messed up the probe before.”

“Quantum?” called Andra. “What do you think?”

“It could be,” the radio voice replied. “The nanoprocessors store data in organic polymers — which might be edible to a truly omnivorous microbe. There’s always a first time.”

“Microbes eating nanoplast!” Skyhook exclaimed. “What about other sentients? Are the microbes contagious?”

“You’ll have to put us in isolation,” said Andra.

“Andra,” said Pelt, “the cross–linking is starting to disrupt my entire system.” His voice came lower and fainter. “I don’t know how long I can keep my filters open.”

Andra stared desperately at the door of the shuttle, so near and yet so far. “Quantum, how long could I last breathing unfiltered air?”

“That’s hard to say. An hour should be okay; we’ll clean your lungs out later.”

She tried to recall how long the first rat had lived. Half a day?

“I’m shutting down,” Pelt warned her. “I’m sorry, Andra…”

Skyhook said, “Pelt, you’ll last longer in rest mode. We’ll save you yet — there’s got to be an antibiotic that will work. They’ve got DNA — we’ll throw every DNA analogue we’ve got at them.”

The nanoplastic skin opened around Andra’s mouth, shrinking back around her head and neck. An otherworldly scent filled her lungs, a taste of ginger and other unnameable things, as beautiful as the vision of golden ringlets. Planet Ginger, she thought, smelled as lovely as it looked. She was the first human to smell it; but would these breaths be her last?

Pelt’s skin shriveled down her arms, getting stuck at her waist near the spot that got sprayed. She tried again to pull herself through the phycoids, grabbing their tough loops. Suddenly she had another idea. Pulling in her arms, she sank down and rolled herself over and over, just like the zoöids. This worked much better, for the phycoid foliage proved surprisingly elastic, bending easily beneath her and bouncing back again. Perhaps those zoöids were not quite so silly after all.

At the door, Skyhook had already extruded sheets of quarantine material, to isolate her and protect his own nanoplast from whatever deadly infection Pelt harbored. The doorway extended and scooped her up into the cabin.

As the doorway constricted, at last closing out the treacherous planet, Andra let out a quick sigh of relief. “Skyhook, we’ve got to save Pelt. Have you got anything to help him?”

Two long tendrils were already poking into the quarantine chamber, to probe the hapless skinsuit. “I’m spreading what antibiotics we have on board,” said Skyhook, from the cabin speaker now. “Nucleotide analogues, anything likely to block DNA synthesis and stop the microbes growing. It’s bizarre, treating a sentient for infection.”

Andra carefully peeled off the remaining nanoplast, trying to keep as much of it together as possible, although she had no idea whether it was beyond repair. “Pelt,” she whispered. “You did your best for me.”

By the time they returned to the station, there was still no sign that any of the antibiotics had curbed the microbes. Quantum was puzzled. “I have a few more to try,” she said, “but really, if the chromosomes are regular DNA, something should have worked.”

“Maybe the microbes’ DNA is shielded by proteins.”

“That wouldn’t help during replication, remember? The double helix has to open and unzip down the middle, to let the new nucleotides pair. There’s no way around it.”

Andra frowned. Something was missing; there was still something wrong, about the growing microbes with their three daughter cells. How could they unzip their DNA, fill in each complementary strand, and end up with three helices? She thought she had figured it out before, but now it did not add up. She coughed once, then again harder. Her lungs were starting to react to the dust — she had to start treatment now.

“We’ve got some data on your samples,” Quantum added. “The microbial cells concentrate acid inside, instead of excreting it, like most of our cells do. I still find only fifteen amino acids, but some of them —”

“I’ve got it!” Andra leapt to her feet. “Don’t you see? *The chromosome is a triple helix.* That’s why each cell divides in three — each daughter strand synthesizes two complements, and you end up with three new triple helices, one for each cell.” A fit of coughing caught up with her.

“It could be,” Quantum said slowly. “There are many ways to make a DNA triple helix. One found in human regulatory genes alternates A–T–T triplets with G–C–C.”

“Then it has a two–letter code, not four.” Double–helical DNA has four possible pairs, since A–T is distinguished from T–A; likewise G–C differs from C–G.

Quantum added, “The triple helix is most stable in acid, just what we found in these cells.”

“Just hurry up and design some triplet analogues.” Quantum’s sentient brain could do this far faster than any human. “Triple helix,” Andra repeated. “It would resist ultraviolet damage much better, with the planet’s thin ozone layer. But how to encode proteins, with only two ‘letters’?” The triple helix had only two possible triplets; its three–letter “words” could only specify eight amino acids to build protein. “Maybe it uses words of four letters. With two possible triplets at each position, that would encode two to the fourth power, that is, sixteen possible amino acids.”

“Fifteen,” corrected Quantum, “if one is a stop signal.”

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The next day, after an exhaustive medical workout, Andra felt as if a vacuum cleaner had gone through her lungs. Pelt still had a long way to recover, but at least the pesky microbes were cleaned out.

"It's hopeless," complained Skyhook's eyespeaker. "If even sentients aren't safe, we'll never explore that planet."

"Don't worry," said Quantum's voice above the holostage. "Pelt's nanoplast has an exceptionally high organic content. A slight redesign will eliminate the problem. Machines have that advantage."

Still, Pelt had nearly died, thought Andra.

"Your phycoid and zoöid samples all have toroid cells, too," Quantum added. "They have circular chromosomes, with no nuclear membranes: They're all prokaryotes. Just wait till the Free Fold hears about this," Quantum added excitedly. "I've got the perfect name for the planet."

Andra looked up. "Planet of the Bagels?"

"Planet Prokaryon."

Prokaryon — yes, thought Andra, it sounded just pompous enough that the Fold would buy it.

Still, she thought uneasily about those regular garden rows of phycoid forest and fields, with all kinds of creatures yet to be discovered. "I wonder," she mused. "Someone else just might have named it first."

"Microbe" was first published in *Analog*, August 1995; reprinted in David G. Hartwell's *Year's Best SF*, published by HarperPrism in paperback in 1996.

Joan Slonczewsk researches bacteria in extreme environments and writes award–winning SF about future medicine, revolutions, and alien sexualities. In *The Highest Frontier* (Tor Books, 2011; Campbell Award) a Kennedy daughter goes to college at an orbital space habitat protected from alien invasion by Homeworld Security. Slonczewski's earlier Campbell–award winning classic, *A Door into Ocean* (Tor Books, 1986) creates a world covered entirely by ocean, inhabited by an all–female race of humans who use genetic engineering to defend their unique ecosystem. *Brain Plague* (Tor Books, 2000; Arc Manor, 2009) shows intelligent alien microbes that enhance human brain power — at a price. The genesis of these unique addictive microbes is depicted in *The Children Star* (Tor Books, 1998; Arc Manor, 2009), a "creature feature" great for families. Slonczewski teaches biology at Kenyon College, including the notorious course "Biology in Science Fiction."

Likeness

Judith Chalmer

I ran. Like it,
I was gone
in a matter
of seconds.
Still I would
have liked
to have taken
that much
space.
The huge head
lifting. But
that was after
I went back
and stood
in its place.

It was aware
of me. Though
I was big
it scared me. Why
did it wait
for me to move?
It must have
known something
about will. Something
like that, almost
no brain, just will
locked onto a future.

It was caught
in my hair, sort of.
It flew in.
I was sitting
on the porch.

My back was to it,
of course.
You don’t think
something like that
will come after you,
among the small
lots, houses, signs
for Children Playing.

For a while I kept it
in a jar.
But it was better
to feel it
springing a little
scratchy, a little
sticky, between
two cupped hands.
Of course
I never could
look at it.
And always after
there was the question,
put it back
in the jar or
let it go.
You couldn’t
hold it for long.
It wasn’t that
interesting.

It was scary
to go forward.
I had to
walk under it.
It wasn’t like a crow
or any other thing
with its own business.

I was its business.
I thought I had my own
and could pursue it
but no. Suddenly
on my own road
I was a stranger.

You know it
by its tracks,
the same way
engineers know
radiating subatomic
things. You follow
them, they’re curious,
as far as you can,
sometimes
stopping
at the base
of a tree.
You look up.
Later a neighbor
might say you were
brave to get so close
but you know what
he was thinking.
You had no idea
there was a sign
you shouldn’t
approach.

There was a time
I couldn’t enter
a room without
scanning for it.
I was worried.
Always I’d spot it,
near the light switch,

maybe at the baseboard.
Now I don’t bother.
I’m used to it.

Occasionally
there’s a lot.
They might swarm
out of a crack
in the sidewalk.
You can kill them
but then
there are so many
stiff bodies
and it’s hard
to walk away.

I used to visit it
spitting out its cage.
I suppose, looking back,
it was unhappy.
But I was young.
It was exciting
to stand in front of it
waving and jumping.

You can hear it
coughing
sometimes by itself
in the woods.
You wonder
if it’s real
but then
you’re ashamed.
It never misses
or thinks of you
mornings it steps
down to the water,

stands a bit,
blinks. How can you
be sure? Maybe
it isn’t real.

Sometimes a head
swims by, or rises
to the surface.
Maybe it doesn’t rise.
Maybe it sinks
partially under.
The important thing
is that you look
into its eyes.
It doesn’t like you
exactly, not
the way you’d
imagine, but what
can you do.
You can never
uncouple.
Nothing
you can do
will remove
your likeness
from its eyes.

Judith Chalmer is co–translator with author Michiko Oishi of a book of poems, *Deepening Snow*, published as a limited edition print and trade book by Plowboy Press. She was a 2012 winner of the Newberger Prize from *Lilith Magazine*. Her poems have been published recently in *Nimrod International*, *The New Haven Review*, *Conclave*, and *Stone Canoe*.

Crashdown

Emma Osborne

Call to me, plugged and
Quivering as I am.

I’m yours, your
Scatterling. I’m a full–thrust and heaving
    Creak of outer–skin.
It’s my fuselage that drums; a bent twist and yank at the entry.
        You steer — you always have and I’m
Peppered with dirt from the
Last world, the
Lost world — we’ve just left it and already it doesn’t exist.

I’ve dropped from the black float
    Here is the fall,
Terminal and swift. It shakes my bolts, tapping threads to unwinding
        Though everything is bending deep, like a blind trip into
    A forever of
Nothing more until we hit dirt and I
    Cling, shuddering
To the loam.

Emma Osborne is a fiction writer and poet from Melbourne, Australia. Her poetry has been featured as an editor's choice at *Star*Line*. Her fiction is out at *Daily Science Fiction* and is forthcoming at *Aurealis* and *Shock Totem.*

The only way to shut her up is to put a book in front of her. She tweets as @redscribe.

she’s alive, alive

Gwynne Garfinkle

the titular bride
with her electrified hair
and jawline scars
is alive for less
than five minutes of film
time enough for her makers
to unwrap some of her bandages
clothe her in a gown made from a sheet
and introduce her to her betrothed

we’re on the monster’s side
he’s been through a lot
nearly burned to death
shot, chased through the countryside
by a mob of angry villagers
hoisted Christ–like on a pole
and, worst of all
deprived of the blind friend
who taught him booze and music

then the woman created for him
gets a look at him
she makes a strangled sound
then her screams reverberate
through the laboratory
she has no desire to be
“the monster’s mate”
(whatever the credits might say)
the weeping monster’s had enough

still, does he have the right
to pull that lever
and blow the unwilling bride
to atoms?

he’ll be resurrected
in *Son of Frankenstein*
and a slew of follow–ups
with ever less pathos, more rampaging
the bride won’t be invited

she hisses her derision
as if to say
this movie’s hers
and she needs less than five minutes
of film to live forever

Gwynne Garfinkle lives in Los Angeles. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in *Interfictions*, *Strange Horizons*, *Mythic Delirium*, *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*, *Flying Higher: An Anthology of Superhero Poetry*, *Shimmer*, and *Goblin Fruit*, among other publications. For more about her work, visit her website: gwynnegarfinkle.com, or follow her on Twitter @gwynnega.

Graveyard Rose

Seanan McGuire

It was sometime after midnight, with five hundred miles to go
When I pulled into the truck stop looking for a cup of Joe;
I'm a loner by my nature, and a trucker by my trade.
It's a lucky man can do the things he loves and still get paid.

It was just another diner, nothing special, nothing strange,
Just the sort of spot a man can stop when home is out of range.
Just a wide patch on the highway, neon, diesel, glass and chrome.
Not the sort of spectral port of call a good ghost should call home.

> But she's never been a good ghost, not for one day in her death;
> She stopped playing by the rules the day that she gave up on breath.
> She's the angel of the truck stops; it's the afterlife she chose.
> She's the flower of the graveyard, she's our ageless roadside Rose.

She was standing in the shadows, neon highlights in her hair,
And I almost walked right by her, never knowing she was there.
She was laughing as she said, "Hey, Mister, help a girl in need?"…
And I don't know why she chose me, nor the reason I agreed.

And the neon traveled with her as she moved to take a seat,
Like a sailor coming home the day his journey is complete.
Don McLean was on the jukebox, belting out his great good–bye;
When I asked her what she'd like, she smiled and said, "I'll have the pie."

> And she's never been a good ghost, not for one day in her death;
> She stopped playing by the rules the day that she gave up on breath.
> She's the angel of the truck stops; it's the afterlife she chose.
> She's the flower of the graveyard, she's our ageless roadside Rose.

I don't know just when I knew her, but I knew her all the same,
Because truckers have our legends, and our ghosts have got their fame.
She asked, "So have you guessed my name?" — I answered, "I suppose."
Then I offered her my hand, and said, "It's nice to meet you, Rose."

Well, she didn’t seem a bit surprised as she reached for my hand,
And she didn’t have a heartbeat, and she said, “Please understand,
I’m not here to cause you trouble, and this isn’t what you think.
I’m not here to hurt or haunt you. I’m just looking for a drink.”

I said “I heard you were a killer,” she said “lies, all lies,
Though it’s true I’m often with a driver, on the night he dies.
For men can sometimes get confused on a road that they don’t know;
They need someone who knows the way and can tell them where to go.
They need someone to steer them straight to where they’re meant to be…
They need a hand to hold the map, and that’s why they need me.

And I’ve never been a good ghost, not for one day in my death,
I gave up on playing by the rules when I gave up on breath.
I’ll rove these roads forever — it’s the afterlife I chose —
But I’ll help you if I get the chance…” and I said, “Thank you, Rose.”

Well, I drove her to the limits of a town not far away,
And she vanished like a fable at the breaking of the day.
As she slipped away, she kissed my cheek and said, “We’ll meet again…”
And I find that I’m not worried ’bout the how, or ’bout the when.

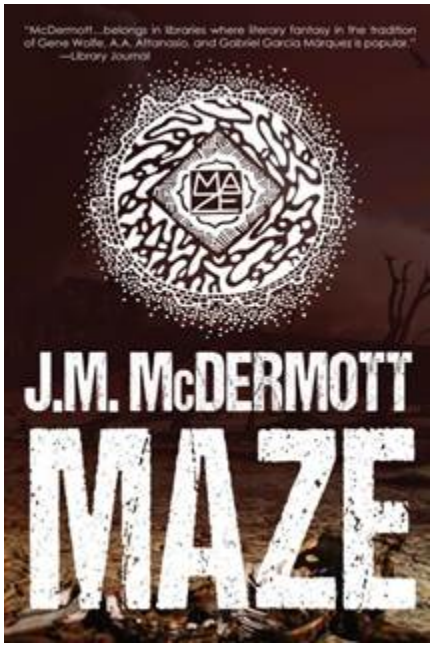
For there’s beauty on the open road a man can learn to find;
Flowers blossom on the median, and fate is sometimes kind.
When it’s time to make the final drive, I won’t be scared at all,
Rose will be right here beside me, all along that final haul.

And she’s never been a good ghost, not for one day in her death;
She stopped playing by the rules the day that she gave up on breath.
She’s the angel of the truck stops; it’s the afterlife she chose.
She’s the flower of the graveyard, she’s our ageless roadside Rose.

She’s the blossom of the median; she’s the place a lost man goes.

She’s the flower of the graveyard, she’s our ageless roadside Rose.

Seanan McGuire, sometimes also known as “Mira Grant,” is the author of more than a dozen urban fantasy and science fiction novels, including the newly released *Sparrow Hill Road*. She lives in Northern California, in a town with more than a few ghost stories of its own, where she endeavors not to be eaten by her three inordinately large cats. When not at home writing, she is either at a convention or at a Disney Park. She can be found at www.seananmcguire.com, on Twitter as @seananmcguire, or on Tumblr as seananmcguire.tumblr.com.


"McDermott...belongs in libraries where literary fantasy in the tradition of Gene Wolfe, A.A. Attanasio, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez is popular."
—Library Journal
J.M. McDERMOTT
MAZE

Maze
By J.M. McDermott

From every corner of time and space, sometimes people go missing without a trace. They never come back.

Get lost in the long stone halls of the maze with the ones that find each other, form tribes, scrape out a life from rocks and sand. Their stories interweave. Maia Station is a scientist ripped from stasis, but she has no tools to test the way things are. Instead, she raises her daughter as best she can and survives. Wang Xin once had his head dipped in water, and a djinni in the water entered his eye. He sees the future, exactly as it was supposed to be if he hadn't seen the light, but it does him no good in the life he has. In a world much like our own, Joseph comes home from a ten year high school reunion and encounters a light in the darkness. The light speaks.

My name is Jenny. Put me in your lung.
Breathe deep.

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Afterparty

Daryl Gregory

The Parable of the Girl Who Died and Went to Hell, Not Necessarily in That Order

There was a girl who lived on the streets in a northern city. She was sixteen years old when she found God, and had just turned seventeen when God abandoned her.

She didn't understand why He would turn His back on her now, after He had saved her life. She'd been living rough for two years. At night she navigated by bunk–finder apps, competing for space in the shelters with the thousands of other teenagers roaming the city. She did bad things to get by. She worked the crowded sidewalks, beaming her profile pic to the dashboards of the trolling cars, climbing into front seats and climbing out again fifteen minutes later. She stole, and she beat other teenagers who tried to steal from her, and once she did something terrible, something unforgivable.

When she thought of what she'd done, even glancingly, a black tunnel seemed to open up behind her eyes. Anything might trigger the memory: a word, the sight of an old woman, the smell of soup burning on a stove. On those days she thought the black would swallow her whole.

Then one night, at the end of a week of black days, she found herself in the Spadina station looking over the edge of the platform, measuring the short distance to the rails. She could feel the train coming, growling to her, pushing its hot breath down the tracks. The concrete rumbled encouragement to her feet. She moved up to the yellow line, and the toes of her sneakers touched air. The only way out of the black tunnel, she realized, was through it.

She felt a hand on her arm. "Hey there." It was a friend, one of her first on the street, a tall black boy older than her by a few years who maintained a crazy rectangular beard. He said, "You doing anything?"

She didn't know how to answer that.

She followed him up out of the station. A while later, an older man with hardcore prison tattoos picked them up in a rusting SUV and drove them a

few miles to a strip mall. Most of the stores were empty. The man, who said he was a pastor, opened one of the doors and said, “Welcome to our little church.”

People began to filter in and take seats in the circle of folding chairs. The service began with singing, songs she didn’t know but that sounded familiar. And then the pastor stood in the middle of the circle for the sermon. He turned as he talked, making eye contact with the people, making eye contact with her, which made her uncomfortable. She couldn’t remember now what he’d spoken about.

At the end of the service, everyone stood up and formed a line in front of the pastor, their hands out, mouths open like birds. Her friend looked at her questioningly; it was her decision. She stood up with the others, and when it was her turn the pastor held up a piece of paper with a single word printed on it: *Logos*. “This is the word made flesh,” he said.

She wasn’t stupid. She’d eaten paper before, and knew that the ink could contain almost anything. She opened her mouth, and he placed it on her tongue. The paper dissolved like cotton candy.

She felt nothing. If there was anything mixed into the ink or the paper, it was too mild to affect her.

That night, as she lay on a bed in a shelter that the pastor had lined up for her, the black tunnel was still there. But there was something else, too: a feeling, as if she were being watched.

No: watched over.

She made her way back to the church the next day, and the day after that. The feeling of a loving presence grew like sun rising over her shoulder. The pastor called it the Numinous. “It’s knowledge,” he said. Proof that we are all loved, all connected.

Her problems weren’t solved. She still slept in restaurant bathrooms, and lifted snacks from gas stations, and gave blow jobs to men in cars. Still struggled with the black tunnel. But she could not shake that secret knowledge that she was loved. She could not yet forgive herself, but she began to think that someone else might.

One night, a month after that first church service, just a few days before her birthday, the cops swept through the park, and she was arrested for solicitation. Because she was underage, they would not release her until they found her parents. She wouldn’t help the police; the last thing she

wanted was to let her parents know where she was. God, she thought, would provide a way out of this.

But as the days passed in the detention center, something was changing. God's presence faded, as if He was moving away from her, turning His back on her. She began to panic. She prayed, and wept, and prayed some more. Then a female guard caught her creating her own sacrament, swallowing scraps of toilet paper, and thought she had smuggled in smart drugs. They took her blood and swabbed her tongue and made her pee in a cup. Two days later they transferred her to a hospital west of the city, and locked her up with crazy people.

On her second night in the hospital, a red–haired woman appeared in her room. She seemed familiar, and then suddenly the girl remembered her. "You let me sleep on your couch once."

The woman stepped into the room. Her red hair, the girl saw now, was shot with threads of gray. "Wasn't my idea," the woman said. "But yeah." It had been ten below, and the red–haired woman had found her shivering outside a gas station. The girl had thought the woman wanted sex, but no; she'd fed her pizza and let her spend the night, and the girl had slipped out of the apartment before morning. It was the kindest thing a stranger had ever done for her, until she met the pastor.

"What are you doing here?" the woman asked. Her voice was soft. "What did you take?"

How could she explain that she'd taken nothing? That they'd locked her up because she'd finally realized that God was real?

"I've lost it," the girl said. "I've lost the Numinous."

The woman seemed shocked at the word, as if she recognized it. Perhaps she was part of the church? The girl told her her story, and the woman seemed to understand. But then the woman asked questions that proved she didn't understand at all: "This pastor — did he tell you the name of the drug? Where he got it? How long have you been in withdrawal?"

The black tunnel seemed to throw itself open, and the girl refused to say any more. After a time the red–haired woman went away, and the nurses came to her with pills that they said would help her with her depression, her anxiety. A psychologist brought her to his office — "just to talk."

But she did not need antidepressants, or soothing conversation. She understood, finally, why God had withdrawn from her. What He was trying to tell her.

When she was full of God’s love, she couldn’t do what she needed to do. God *had* to step back so that she’d have the strength to do what she should have done months ago. So she could make the required sacrifice.

At her next meeting with the psychologist, she stole a ceramic mug from his desk. He never noticed; she was practiced at lifting merchandise. An hour after that, before she could lose her nerve, she went to the bathroom and smashed the mug against the edge of the stainless steel sink. She chose the largest shard, then sawed apart the veins in her left arm.

God, she knew, helps those who help themselves.

— G.I.E.D.

Chapter One

“So you want to leave us, Lyda?” Counselor Todd asked.

“It’s been eight months,” I said. “I think it’s about time, don’t you?”

Dr. Gloria shook her head, then made a note on her clipboard.

The three of us — Todd, Dr. Gloria, and I — sat in Todd’s closet–sized office in the NAT ward. Three chairs, a pressed wood coffee table, and no windows. Todd leaned back in his chair, flicking his smart pen: *snick* and the screen opened like a fan; *clack* and it rolled up again. The file on the screen appeared and disappeared too fast to read, but I could guess what document it was.

Todd liked to portray himself as a man of the people. A white man who favored work shirts that had never seen a day of work and work boots that had never touched mud. This in contrast to Dr. Gloria, who occupied the seat to his right. She believed in the traditional uniform of doctors: white coat, charcoal pencil skirt, femme heels that weren’t so high as to be impractical. Her nondigital clipboard and Hot Librarian glasses were signature props. I did not want her in this meeting, but neither Todd nor I had the power to keep her out.

“Lyda,” Todd said in a knowing tone. “Does your desire to leave now have anything to do with Francine’s death?”

Francine was the girl who had killed herself with Todd’s mug. I presented my I’m–not–quite–following–you frown.

“The transfer request was placed two weeks ago, on the day after she died,” Todd said. “You seemed upset by her death.”

“I barely knew her.”

“You broke *furniture*,” he said.

“It was a plastic chair,” I said. “It already had a crack in it.”

“Don’t quibble,” Dr. Gloria said. “It’s the display of anger he’s worried about.”

“I was mad at you doctors,” I said. “I told you to put her on antidepressants —”

“Which we did,” Todd said.

“Too Goddamn late. Jesus, her symptoms were obvious. I couldn’t believe no one had taken steps. Her parents should be suing the hospital’s ass off right now.”

“We haven’t been able to find them,” he said.

“Perfect. Homeless orphans can’t sue either.”

Dr. Gloria put down her clipboard. “Insulting everyone who works here isn’t going to help you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s just — she was so young.”

“I know,” Counselor Todd said. He sounded suddenly tired. “I tried to talk to her.”

Todd could be an idiot, but he did care about the patients. And as the only full–time counselor on the ward, he worked essentially alone. The neuro–atypical ward was a lab for the hardcore cog–sci docs, the neuropsych researchers. They didn’t much care for talk therapy, or for talking therapists like Todd.

So as Todd became more isolated, he couldn’t help but grow attached to the people he spent the most time with: The patients had become, without him realizing it, his cohort, his troop. I knew that my degrees intimidated him. He suspected that because of my résumé I was more aligned with the neuropsych folks — which was true. But my highfalutin background also made him secretly desire my approval. Sometimes I used my power to get the lab to do the right thing for the patients, but I wasn’t above using it to get myself out of here.

Todd did his best to pull himself back to counselor mode. “Were you disturbed by Francine’s symptoms?”

“How so?”

“They were so similar to your own. The religious nature of her hallucinations —”

“A lot of schizos have religious delusions.”

“She wasn’t schizophrenic, at least not naturally. We believe she’d been taking a designer drug.”

“Which one?”

“We haven’t figured that out yet. But I was struck by the way she talked about God as a physical presence. That was how you used to speak about your angel.”

Dr. Gloria looked at me over her glasses. This was her favorite topic. I stopped myself from glaring at her.

“I’ve been symptom free for months,” I said to Todd. “No angels. No voices in my head. I didn’t think the antipsychotics you prescribed would work, honestly. My hallucination’s been so persistent, so long, that…” I

shrugged. “But you were right, and I was wrong. I’m not too proud to admit that.”

“I thought they were worth a try,” he said. “When you showed up here, you were in a pretty bad place. Not just your injuries.”

“Oh no,” I said, agreeing with him. “It was everything. I was fucked up.” I’d been sentenced to the NAT after creating my own drive–thru at a convenience store. I swerved off the road at 60 KPH and plowed through the wall at three in the afternoon. My front bumper crushed a woman’s leg and sent another man flying, but nobody was killed. The owner told a reporter that “somebody up there was watching out for them.”

God gets the easiest performance reviews.

I said, “I feel like I’ve finally gotten a handle on my problems.”

I glanced up. I’d delivered this statement with all the sincerity I could muster. Todd seemed to be taking it in. Then he said, “Have you been thinking about your wife?”

A question as subtle as a crowbar. Counselor Todd trying to pop me open.

Dr. G said, “He noticed that you’re touching your ring.”

I glanced down. The wedding band was polished brass, six–sided on the outside. A friend of ours had forged a matching pair for us.

I placed my hands on the arms of my chair. “I think of her every day,” I said. “But not obsessively. She’s my wife. I miss her.”

Perhaps this struck him as an odd thing to say about a woman who had tried to kill me. Instead he said, “It’s interesting that you use the present tense.”

“She *has* been dead almost ten years,” Dr. Gloria said.

“I don’t believe that there’s a time limit on love or grief,” I said. A paraphrase of something Counselor Todd had told me very earnestly in my first month on the ward. I was detoxing then, vulnerable and wide open, sucking in Todd’s bromides as if they were profound truths. When you can’t get the heroin, take the methadone.

“And your child?” he asked.

I sat back, my heart suddenly beating hard. “Are you working through a checklist there?”

“You’re sounding angry again,” Dr. Gloria said.

Todd said, “You mentioned her only once in our therapy sessions, but according to your file…”

If he flicked open that damn pen I was going to leap across the table at him.

“I don’t have a child,” I said.

Dr. Gloria looked over her glasses at me, the Medical Professional version of an eye roll.

“Anymore,” I said.

Todd pursed his lips, signaling disappointment. “I’m sorry, Lyda, I just can’t sign off on this. I think you’re trying to get out of here so you can score, and you still haven’t addressed some key issues in —”

“I’ll take the chip.”

He looked up at me, surprised.

“The terms of my sentence give me the option,” I said. “All you have to do is sign. You know I’ve been a model patient.”

“But you’re almost done here. Two more months and you’re out. If you go on the chip, that’s a mandatory year of tracking. You won’t be able to leave the province without permission.”

“I understand that.”

He gave me a long look. “You know they can’t be spoofed, yes? Not like the old chips. Your blood alcohol levels will be sent to us every ten seconds. Anything stronger than aspirin throws up a red flag. And any use of a controlled substance, other than those prescribed to you, gets immediately reported to the police.”

“Any drug can and will be used against me,” I said. “Got it.”

“Good. Because the last time I brought up the chip, you told me I could shove it up my ass.”

“Well, it is very small.”

He suppressed a smile. Todd enjoyed being joked with. Made him feel part of the troop. And as the least insane person on the floor (if I said so myself), I was the person he could most easily talk to. The only question was, would he be insecure enough to keep me here, just so we didn’t have to — sob — break up?

Time to seal the deal. I looked at my feet, feigning embarrassment. “I know this may not be technically allowed after I leave, but…”

“This room is a safe place to say anything,” Todd said.

I looked up. “I’d like to keep in touch with you. If that’s all right.”

“I’m sure that would be fine,” Todd said. “If I sign on for this.” But of course he had already made up his mind.

§

The NAT ward was small, a population of twenty–five to forty, depending on the season. News traveled the floor with telepathic speed. Two of the residents believed they *were* telepathic, so who knows.

I was packing when Ollie appeared in my room. Five foot two, hair falling across her face. Quiet as a closed door. And like everyone on the ward, Severely Fucked in the Head.

She stared into the room, eyes pointed in my direction. Trying to work out the puzzle. That stack of shapes probably belonged to one thing, those horizontal shapes to something else. Once sorted, labels could be applied: bed, wall, duffel bag, human being.

To help her out I said, “Hi, Ollie.”

Her face changed — that slight shift of recognition as she assigned the label “Lyda” to an arrangement of red hair and dark clothes — then went still again. She was angry. I’d made a mistake by not telling her I was leaving. Not as big a mistake as sleeping with her, but enough.

At last she said, “Can I see it?”

“Sure,” I said. Ollie concentrated on the changes in the scene: The object that swung toward her in her visual field must be, logically, my arm. From there she found my wrist, and slid a finger along my forearm. Tactile information integrated more easily than the visual. She peeled back the Band–Aid, pressed the tiny pink bump. She was as unself–conscious with my body as with her own.

“So small,” she said.

“My new portable conscience,” I said. “Like I needed another one.”

Her fingers lingered on my skin, then fell away. “You’re going to look for that dead girl’s dealer.”

I didn’t try to deny it. Even on meds Ollie was the smartest person I’d ever met, after Mikala.

She closed her eyes, cutting out the visual distraction. She looked like a little girl. Told me once that her Filipino mother was 4’10”, her white Minnesota father over six feet, and she was still waiting for those Norwegian genes to kick in.

“You can’t know that it’s the same drug that hit you,” she said without opening her eyes. “There are thousands of countertop tweakers out there.

Somebody just happened to whip up something with the same symptoms."

The glories of the DIY smart drug revolution. Any high school student with a chemjet and an internet connection could download recipes and print small–batch drugs. The creative types liked to fuck with the recipes, try them out on their friends. People swallowed paper all the time without knowing what they were chewing. Half the residents of the NAT ward weren't addicts; they were beta testers.

"You're right," I said flatly. "It's probably not the same drug at all."

She opened her eyes. Now seeing right through me. "I can help you," she said.

There was a certainty in her voice. Ollie used to do things for the US government, and the US government used to do things to Ollie.

"I don't think they're going to let you walk out of here," I said. Ollie was not one of the voluntary patients. Like me, she'd been convicted of a crime, then sent here because the docs thought she was an interesting case. "Just stay here," I said. "And heal."

Heal. That was a NAT joke.

She said, "I can be out of here in two —"

"Nurse," I said in a low voice, warning her. We residents did this a lot on the ward, like kids playing in the street calling "car."

"Seconds," Ollie finished.

Dr. Gloria and one of the day–shift nurses walked toward the room. "Ready?" the nurse asked me.

Dr. G looked at Ollie, then back toward me, a knowing smile on her face. "If you're all done here," she said.

I picked up my bag. "I've got to go," I said to Ollie. I touched her shoulder on the way out. This is me, the touch told her. This is me moving away from you.

§

"She's in love with you, you know," Dr. G said.

"Hospital infatuation," I said.

We stood on the sidewalk outside the hospital, waiting for my ride under a gray sky leaking sunlight. Dirty snow banked the sidewalk, peppered with black deicer pellets. Behind us, staff and visitors passed in and out of the revolving doors like ions through a membrane.

I folded up the plastic bag that contained my prescription and jammed my hands into the pockets of my thin jacket. It had been early fall when I went in, and my street clothes had failed to evolve while in storage. But I was not about to go back inside that building, even to stay warm. I was a free woman — tethered only by the plastic snitch attached to my vein, broadcasting each taste of my bloodstream to the ether.

Dr. G had followed me out. “You’d be better off staying with her and finishing your sentence inside,” she said. “Less temptation. You were staying clean, Lyda.”

“Edo’s making NME One–Ten.”

“You don’t know that.”

“All Francine could talk about was ‘the Numinous.’ That is no fucking coincidence. Edo broke his promise.”

“He never made that promise,” she said.

“Yeah, well, I made a promise to *him*.”

“Listen to yourself,” Dr. Gloria said. “You’re pissed off. Have you considered that you’re overreacting to the girl’s death? You have a blind spot for little lost girls.”

“Fuck off.”

“Lyda —”

“I’m responsible for the drug that killed her.”

“Even if the substance is the One–Ten, which is doubtful, that doesn’t mean that it’s Edo Vik.”

“Then I guess I have to find out who is making it.”

A car pulled up to the curb, a decrepit Nissan hybrid. The cost of the gas had to be enormous. The driver jumped out of the car, ran to me with arms out. “Lyda!”

Bobby was a could–have–been–handsome white boy, twenty–three years old, with stiff black hair and almond eyes, so maybe a little Asian in the mix. A former ward–mate, and batshit crazy. But a good kid. More importantly, he lived in Toronto, and he owned a car.

I let him hug me. The price to pay for the ride.

“You look all healthy,” he said. Hanging from a leather thong around his neck was a small plastic treasure chest, one of those aquarium accessories with *Real Working Hinge*. He never went anywhere without it.

“Where are we going?” he asked me.

“Take me to my dealer.”

He blinked in surprise. “Uh, are you sure?”

“Relax. I just want to talk to him.”

“You just got out of the ward. Don’t you want to go home?”

“I don’t have a home. That apartment is long gone.”

“Oh, then maybe a hotel?”

“I’m getting cold out here, Bobby.”

He opened the passenger door for me, then hustled around to the other side.

Dr. Gloria said, “I can’t protect you if you don’t listen to me.”

“Then stay here.”

“Oh, you don’t get away that easy.” Dr. Gloria’s wings unfurled from her back with a snap, and the world vanished in a blaze of heavenly radiance. I winced and looked away.

“Lo, I am with you always,” she said. I opened one eye. She pulsed like a migraine aura, throwing off megawatts of holy glow. Then her wings convulsed, and she was airborne.

[END EXCERPT]

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Daryl Gregory is an award–winning writer of genre–mixing novels, stories, and comics. His first novel, *Pandemonium*, won the Crawford Award and was nominated for a World Fantasy Award. His other novels include *The Devil's Alphabet* (a Philip K. Dick award finalist), *Raising Stony Mayhall* (a Library Journal best SF book of the year), and the upcoming *Afterparty*. Many of his short stories are collected in *Unpossible and Other Stories*, which was named one of the best books of 2011 by *Publishers Weekly*. He lives in State College, PA.

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“Stars”

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